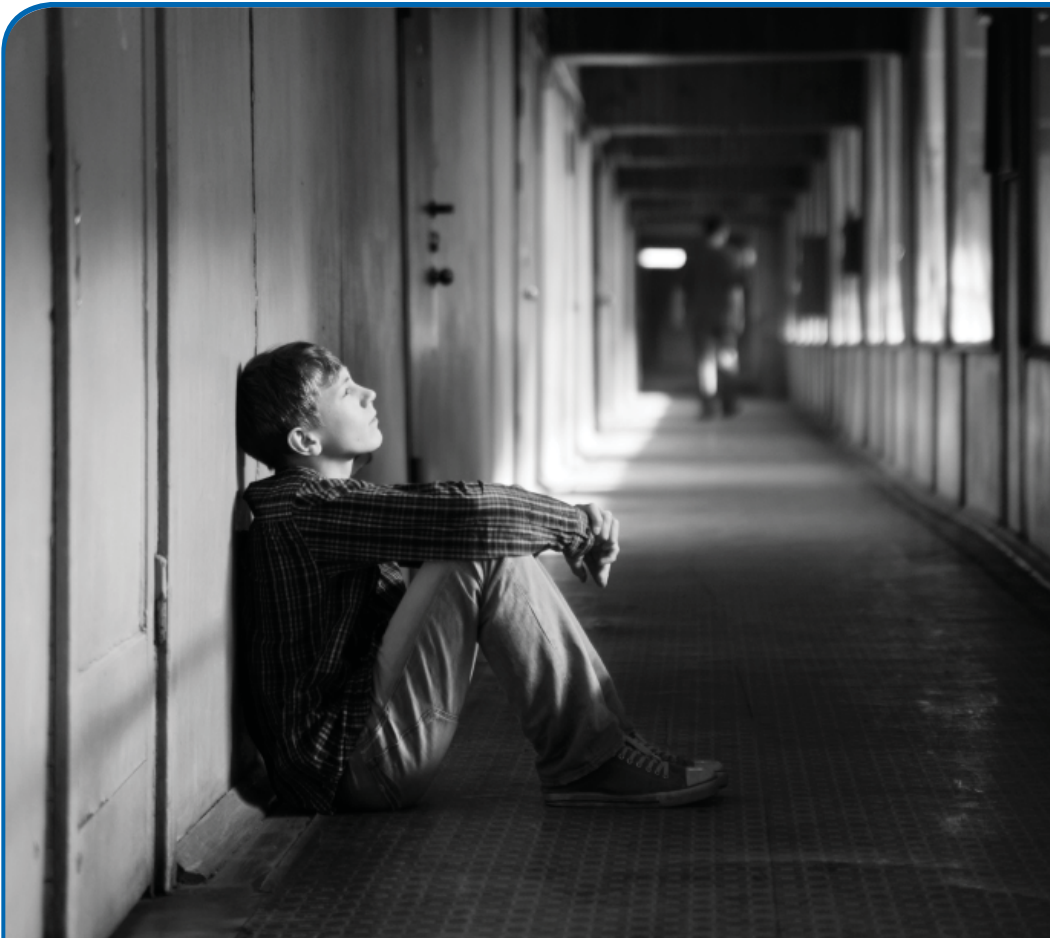


Nebraska YRTC's



Issue Brief Nebraska's Youth Rehabilitation and Treatment Centers

Every year, Nebraska's courts send a number of serious and not-so-serious juvenile offenders to the Youth Residential Treatment Centers (YRTC's) in Kearney and Geneva. Like all placements and services ordered under Nebraska's juvenile code, the goal in placing youth at these institutions should be their rehabilitation. Both YRTC's' missions are consistent with this goal; they aim to provide services and supports to young people so that they can go on to live productive and law-abiding lives.¹ However, as with many other juvenile services across the United States, promises of quality services and rehabilitation are not always fulfilled.

Evidence is mounting nationally and in Nebraska that the YRTC model and other large juvenile corrections institutions simply do not work. They have been described as: "dangerous, ineffective, unnecessary, obsolete, wasteful, and inadequate."² Data suggest Nebraska's YRTC's are:

- **monopolizing available funding for juvenile justice,**
- **serving the wrong children, and**
- **inadequately providing for the needs of youth.**

With over \$17 million a year spent on our Youth Residential Treatment Centers, the time has come for Nebraska to keep youth closer to home and invest our juvenile justice dollars in truly rehabilitative and cost effective models.

A Publication of



voices for
children
IN NEBRASKA

Recent Reforms to the YRTCs

1994: The Office of Juvenile Services is created as a separate division of the Department of Correctional Services, with a director appointed by the governor. Nebraska's institutions for delinquent youth in Kearney and Geneva are re-named Youth Rehabilitation and Treatment Centers and placed under OJS.

1997: OJS is placed under the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), ending the YRTCs 23-year relationship with the Department of Correctional Services.

1999: The creation of the 40-bed Chemical Dependency Unit at the Hastings Regional Center expands the services available to youth at YRTC-Kearney. The Nebraska Juvenile Services Master Plan recommends increasing staffing and other changes which are not fully implemented.

2007: An updated Nebraska Juvenile Services Master Plan is released, with recommendations for greater numbers of services and programming, better staffing, aftercare, and a shorter length of stay. Recommendations are partially implemented.

2011: YRTC-Kearney replaces the Positive Peer Culture (PPC) model, which was widely criticized for being ineffective and outdated, with EQUIP. The Chemical Dependency Unit is reduced to 16-beds, due to Medicaid regulation changes.

History

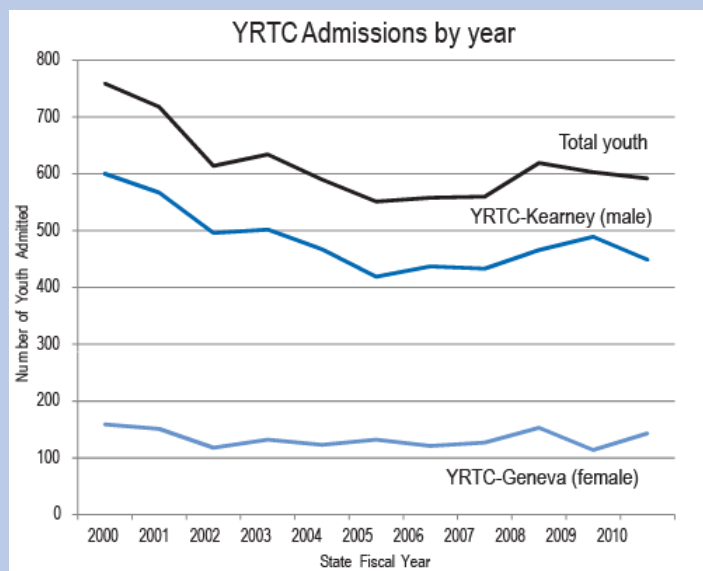
In 1879, the Girls and Boys Industrial School in Kearney opened its doors. Similar schools for delinquent youth were appearing across the country with the goal of keeping them separate from adult offenders and providing opportunities for rehabilitation.³ In 1891, a Girls Industrial School at Geneva was established, and Kearney became an all-male facility. These two institutions, over a hundred years old, have slowly evolved into today's YRTCs.

Many reforms and improvements to the YRTCs have been made over the past 18 years. Most important was the placement of the YRTC-Kearney (which serves young men) and YRTC-Geneva (which serves young women) under the Office of Juvenile Services (OJS). OJS was created to take the unique needs and developmental differences of youth into account. Placing the YRTCs under OJS showed a willingness on the part of policymakers to ensure that appropriate and rehabilitative services were provided at these institutions. Moving OJS to the Department of Health and Human Services seemed to further signal this intention. However, the reforms of the past 18 years have yet to succeed in assuring that the YRTCs fully meet the needs of the young people in their care. Updates to old infrastructure, sufficient staff, and quality services all require more financial resources than Nebraska has ever been willing to invest.

Large institutions for juvenile delinquents are being shuttered across the United States in favor of investing in better, cost-effective alternatives. Nebraska's outdated YRTCs are monopolizing limited juvenile justice dollars, serving the wrong youth, and failing to provide effective and adequate services for those youth who do need a high-level of secure care. The time has come to consider reforms to our juvenile justice system that will better rehabilitate youth.

Monopolizing Juvenile Justice Dollars

Figure 1.



Only a small number of juvenile delinquents are served by the YRTCs each year, yet Nebraska spends a huge percentage of its state juvenile justice dollars on these two facilities.

The number of youth admitted to the YRTCs annually has decreased in past the ten years. In 2000, 759 youth were admitted to the YRTCs. Each year for the past three years, about 600 youth have been admitted to the YRTCs.

While this is slightly higher than the number of youth admitted from 2004 to 2007, admissions are down and seem to be holding steady (see Figure 1).⁴

The 592 youth admitted to the YRTCs only account for about 4% of the 14,030 juvenile arrests in 2010. Most youth in the juvenile justice system are served elsewhere, yet few state juvenile justice dollars are made available to these services. While YRTC expenditures have increased, funding under the County Juvenile

Services Aid Program (established in 2001) has remained at a low and stagnant level.⁵ Only \$1.5 million are available for counties to fund community-based juvenile services each year, a decrease from the initial \$2.7 million provided.⁶

	FY '07-'08	FY '08-'09	FY '09-'10
YRTC - Kearney	\$9,315,728	\$9,719,106	\$10,097,470
YRTC - Geneva	\$6,535,983	\$6,757,830	\$7,025,004
Total	\$15,851,711	\$16,476,936	\$17,122,474

In 2010, it cost an average of \$58,962.92 for each youth at YRTC-Geneva and an average of \$29,297.60 at YRTC-Kearney. A 2006 Ohio study found that community supervision programs cost an average of \$8,539 for each youth and had results that were equal to or better than those from confinement, for all but the highest-risk offenders. Similarly the Washington Institute for Public Policy found that every dollar invested in Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care (MTFC) returned \$14 to taxpayers.⁷ Downsizing the YRTCs and reinvesting the savings in evidence-based and community-based services would generate significant benefits for both Nebraska and its youth.

Serving the Wrong Youth

Secure, residential confinement for juvenile delinquents should only be used for the highest-risk youth who pose a threat to society. National studies have found that lower-risk youth typically suffer when placed in large juvenile institutions like the YRTCs: their likelihood of reoffending actually increases with such a placement.⁸

Only about a third of youth committed to YRTCs from State Fiscal Year 2007-2010 have been placed for violent crimes.⁹ Property crimes are the most common reason for commitment to YRTCs. Drug offenses, public order offenses, and probation violations are also prominent (see Figure 2).

National studies point out that many low-level offenders are sent to these types of facilities because of a lack of community-based programs and services. In effect, turning YRTCs into “dumping grounds” for youth who face mental health needs or are involved in the child welfare system but have not been able to access effective treatment.¹⁰ A lack of investment in community-based programs and a decline in services in recent years, especially in rural Nebraska, contribute to the reason so many non-violent offenders are sent to the YRTCs.

These youth would be better served with effective alternatives like Multisystemic Therapy (MST) and Family Functional Therapy (FFT), which provide services to youth in their communities, involve families, are less costly, and have effectively reduced arrest and re-commitment rates.¹¹

Ineffective and Inadequate Services

National studies of recidivism (re-entry and re-offense) rates of large juvenile institutions like the YRTCs show poor results. Many studies “find that incarceration is no more effective than probation or alternative sanctions in reducing the criminality of adjudicated youth, and a number of well-designed studies suggest that correctional placements actually exacerbate criminality.” Around 75% of youth in juvenile correctional custody in a number of states had been re-arrested within three years of release. Other states showed that 24-51% of youth returned to

(Continued on page 5)

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Figure 2: Why are Nebraska's youth admitted to Youth Residential Treatment Centers?



Definitions

Violent crimes: Includes robbery, assault, sexual assault and vehicular homicide

Drug crimes: Drug-abuse violations including distribution, possession, possession with intent and possession of drug paraphernalia

Property crimes: Includes arson, auto theft, breaking and entering, burglary, shoplifting, theft, vandalism and criminal mischief

Public order offenses: Includes aiding and abetting, concealed weapon, disorderly conduct, disturbing the peace, driving under the influence, escape, failure to comply, false information, forgery, obstructing a police officer, possession of a firearm, resisting arrest, terroristic threats, trespassing, unauthorized use of a vehicle, and willful reckless driving

Status offenses: Includes minor in possession and procuring alcohol

Source: YRTC-Kearney and YRTC-Geneva Annual Reports, FY 2007-08–2009-10.

correctional custody (whether juvenile or adult) within three years.¹²

Nebraska does not collect recidivism rates for the YRTC's similar to those available in other states. Even our limited measures point to deeper problems, however. In State Fiscal Year 2009-2010, 29% of the youth released from the YRTC-Kearney violated parole or were readmitted to the YRTC within 12 months. This recidivism rate was 17% at YRTC-Geneva during the same time period.¹³ These rates do not include youth who enter the adult system within a year and do not measure longer-term outcomes; more thorough recidivism rates are likely even higher.

Why are the YRTC's so ineffective? Lower-risk youth are unnecessarily kept away from families and communities and exposed to behaviors and treatments that have been shown to increase their likelihood of future juvenile and criminal justice involvement. Youth are sent to the YRTC's instead of using effective alternatives like MST, FFT, and MTFC described above.

The YRTC's also fall short on treating the very serious needs of juveniles committed to their care. This undoubtedly has a role in high recidivism rates. A study of youth committed to the YRTC's in 2006 found:

- 77% of young men had a history of substance abuse and dependency;
- 73% of young men had a behavioral-based disorder;
- 73% of young women and 27% of young men had a serious mental health disorder;
- 67% of young women were victims of physical abuse and reported self-harming behaviors; and
- 36% of young women and 22% of young men had a history of suicidal orientation.¹⁴

With relatively high youth-to-treatment staff ratios at both YRTC's, a lack of specialized services and individual attention, and building design that does not allow for a treatment environment (especially at Kearney), youth are not getting what they need at the YRTC's. Even when they do see improvement, they often return to communities and families where the same problems exist and receive little transitional support.

The most effective models of juvenile institutions for high-risk offenders have been developed in Missouri. Small, secure facilities ranging from 30-36 beds have been built in each of five regions of the state, allowing youth increased access to family and community. Once admitted, youth are placed in even smaller groups. Staff provide support for the youth from the time they enter and continue to work with them once they leave the facility. Missouri has been nationally recognized for this innovation, and its three-year re-incarceration rates at 16.7% are lower than both of Nebraska's YRTC's one-year recidivism rates.¹⁵ If Nebraska wants to build effective and affordable secure facilities for high-risk youth, the Missouri Model provides an excellent starting point.

The YRTC's also fall short on treating the very serious needs of juveniles committed to their care.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

National evidence increasingly suggests that large institutional care for juvenile delinquents is not effective for children, communities, or state budgets. Data from Nebraska's Y RTCs make it clear that they are monopolizing juvenile justice dollars, serving too many non-violent and low-risk youth who are actually being harmed through this placement, and delivering ineffective and inadequate services.

Nebraska can learn from national trends and implement key improvements that better serve our children and make our communities safer. In implementing the following policy recommendations, Nebraska will be following in the footsteps of many other states.

To begin improving our juvenile justice system Nebraska should:

- 1. Limit eligibility for placement at Y RTCs:** A number of states have restricted commitments to juvenile correctional institutions based on the crimes committed and/or their risk of re-offending. California allows youth to be placed only if they have committed a violent crime. North Carolina only allows these youth as well as youth with a history of prior offending to be committed. Both states have seen a drop in their commitments. Savings from fewer youth being committed to the Y RTCs could be used to build more appropriate, community services for those who were unnecessarily committed in the past.
- 2. Invest in evidence-based practices at the community level:** Nebraska has very few funds available for community-based juvenile justice programs. With the success of MST, FFT, and therapeutic foster care already established, it should channel resources into programs we know work. This is especially crucial in rural Nebraska where a lack of services means children may be unnecessarily sent to detention and the Y RTCs.
- 3. Replace Y RTCs with small, community-based facilities for high-risk youth:** Missouri has achieved a great deal of success in building small, secure, regional, intensive treatment facilities for high-risk offenders. While the Y RTCs are well-intentioned, they are outdated and ineffective. Improving the Y RTCs would be costly, requiring new buildings and a huge investment with no guarantee of success in reducing recidivism. Nebraska should spend its money on innovations that have been proven successful.

If our goal is to create a juvenile justice system that is truly rehabilitative and gives young people the tools they need to contribute to society, we must reform and restructure the Y RTCs. While reform is never easy, implementing national best practice will benefit our youth, communities, and state as a whole.

1 "About Y RTC-Kearney." NE DHHS. http://dhhs.ne.gov/children_family_services/Pages/jus_yrtc_aboutyrtck.aspx

"About Y RTC-Geneva." NE DHHS. http://dhhs.ne.gov/children_family_services/Pages/jus_yrtc_aboutyrtcg.aspx

2 Mendel, Richard A. No Place for Kids: The Case for Reducing Juvenile Incarceration. Annie E. Casey Foundation: Baltimore, 2011.

3 "The History of Juvenile Justice." American Bar Association. http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/migrated/publiced/features/DYJpart1_authcheckdam.pdf.

4 Kids Count in Nebraska Narrative Database. Voices for Children in Nebraska.

5 Youth Residential Treatment Center – Kearney: Annual Report FY'07-'08; '08-'09; FY'09-'10;

Youth Residential Treatment Center – Geneva: Annual Report FY'07-'08; FY'08-'09; FY'09-'10.

6 "LR 196: Final Report and Addendum." Nebraska Unicameral.

7 Mendel, No Place for Kids, pp. 20- 21.

8 Mendel, No Place for Kids, p. 13.

9 Figure 2 likely over-estimates violent crimes, since data did not distinguish between felony aggravated assault and more minor forms of assault,

which are not classified as violent by the FBI Uniform Crime Reports.

10 Mendel, No Place for Kids, p. 15.

11 Mendel, No Place for Kids, p. 15.

12 Mendel, No Place for Kids, p. 10.

13 Youth Residential Treatment Center – Geneva: Annual Report FY'09-'10; Youth Residential Treatment Center – Kearney: Annual Report FY'09-'10.

14 Chinn Planning. "Nebraska Juvenile Facilities Master Plan Update." 2007. <http://dhhs.ne.gov/Documents/chinn.pdf>

15 Mendel, No Place for Kids, p. 10.

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