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### **NJ significantly reduces population of children in custody**

**-Racial disparity remains a challenge-**

Trenton – Confinement of youth to detention centers has dropped substantially in the state with the number of youth admitted to secure detention falling 25 percent since 2002, according to a national study conducted by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and supported by the New Jersey Kids Count 2008 report recently released by the Association of Children in New Jersey (ACNJ).

The 2008 KIDS COUNT Data Book also states that New Jersey is tied with Vermont for having the fourth-lowest rate of 10 to 15-year-olds in custody. Between 2002 and 2006, commitments to state facilities fell 33 percent. This reflects the success of the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI) to find alternatives to incarceration for nonviolent youth offenders. The initiative, created and funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, is currently in place in 10 of the 17 New Jersey counties operating detention centers and is expected to expand to all counties operating detention centers by 2010.

JDAI sites have made significant reductions in admissions and length of stay, which positively impacted on the number of minority youth in secure detention. Comparing 2003 to 2007, on any given day in the initial sites, Atlantic, Camden, Essex, Hudson and Monmouth, there were 211 fewer youth in detention. Of these, on any day there were 189 fewer youth of color in detention, a 40.7 percent reduction.

The number of minority youth in detention in the original sites has been cut in half since 2003 in Camden (50.1 percent) and in Essex (47.5 percent). In New Jersey's newest JDAI sites, Bergen, Burlington, Mercer, Ocean and Union, there were 21 fewer kids in detention on any given day in 2007, as compared to 2005, the year prior to these sites joining JDAI. The overall number of minority youth in these sites dropped by 11.8 percent over the same time period. The initiative has also leveled the playing field in JDAI sites in regard to length of stay in detention. Bringing minority and non-minority youth significantly closer in terms of average stays than prior to the implementation of JDAI.

Still, while New Jersey has experienced significant improvements in the detention population, it continues to experience racial disparity in juvenile detention centers. According to the 2008 KIDS COUNT Data Book, both New Jersey and Connecticut struggle to reduce the ratio of the rate at which youth of color are in custody compared to the rate for white youth. In 2006 the rate was 8 to 1, more than twice the national ratio of 3 to 1. Through the efforts of JDAI, New Jersey will be working with the Burns Institute to create enhanced strategies for not only continuing to reduce the overall number of youth of color in custody, but also on positively impacting on racial disparity.

“Due to the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative, New Jersey continues to make great strides in reducing the unnecessary use of juvenile detention, while maintaining community safety,” said Veleria N. Lawson, the Executive Director of the Juvenile Justice Commission. “JDAI is a partnership. By working together, we will continue to examine and improve our juvenile justice system and expand the reach of JDAI to all counties operating detention centers.”

JDAI, a joint initiative of the New Jersey Judiciary, the JJC and numerous county agencies, is safely reducing the unnecessary use of secure detention for New Jersey's youth. In April 2004, New Jersey was selected as an official replication site for the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative and awarded \$200,000 by the foundation. As the lead agency, the JJC worked in partnership with the Judiciary and other state and local agencies to create a state steering committee to guide the initiative statewide. Each participating county also has a local steering committee that relies on collaboration, leadership, and data to make improvements in the county juvenile detention system.

Juvenile detention is a temporary placement of a youth accused of a delinquent act, while awaiting the final outcome of his or her case in court. The purpose of detention is to house youths who, by virtue of alleged offenses or documented prior histories, pose a serious public safety or flight risk.

A primary goal of JDAI is to make sure that secure detention is in fact used only for this purpose – to ensure serious and chronic youthful offenders are detained, and that effective alternatives are available for other youth who can be safely supervised in the community while awaiting final court disposition. The initiative provides a framework of strategies that help reduce the inappropriate use of secure juvenile detention, while maintaining public safety and court appearance rates. A major focus of the work is reducing the disparate use of detention for minority youth.

More information on New Jersey's JDAI can be found at <http://www.njjjc.com/publications.htm>.

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