once they are released from state custody.

And in fact, most youth offenders aren’t even arrested for violent crimes. In 2009, the most recent year for which statistics are available, juvenile arrests for violent offenses fell to the lowest level since at least 1980. The U.S. Department of Justice (http://www.ojjdp.gov/pubs/236477.pdf) reports most of the arrests stemmed from property crimes such as burglary, larceny, motor vehicle theft and arson. Black youths, according to the source, “were overrepresented” in juvenile arrests that year.

$88K Well Spent?

It costs $88,000 a year to keep one minor in state custody – more than twice the cost of one year of tuition at Harvard. In 2007, states spent about $5.7 billion on juvenile incarceration; that money was almost entirely used toward correctional confinement, with little-to-no funding for counseling or educational and vocational training.

That doesn’t typically enhance public safety. The states most successful at lowering their juvenile confinement rates between 1997 and 2007 simultaneously saw the greatest decline in juvenile violent crimes and arrests than states with higher incarceration rates, the Annie E. Casey Foundation reports.

States should look to Connecticut’s Case Review Team as a prime example of how to transform the juvenile sentencing process for the better, according to Justice for Families. Connecticut — which the Justice Department reports has experienced one of the sharpest drops in both youth confinement and crime in recent years — sets up conferences that include family members, probation staff, school personnel and social workers to explore alternatives to institutional confinement. In the first two years of employing that system, 72 percent of the participating youth reportedly avoided out-of-home placement.

A substantial number of them did not have any further encounters with the justice system.

In addition to reforming the sentencing process, experts say investing directly in communities — by supporting basic social services such as education, affordable housing and drug rehabilitation — is typically associated with increased public safety.
“We want kids to be accountable for their actions. But the question is, how do we hold them accountable while also allowing them to succeed and become productive members of society? We don’t want them all to end up like Corey, my son,” Bauer said.