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The Juvenile Justice System in Washington State: Recommendations to Improve Cost-Effectiveness

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this legislatively directed study is to recommend changes that can lead to an improved use of scarce juvenile justice resources in Washington. The study provides a financial snapshot of how Washington spends money in two key parts of the state's juvenile justice system: the state Juvenile Rehabilitation Administration (JRA) and the county juvenile courts. We also summarize research-based evidence on the costs and benefits of different approaches in the juvenile justice field.

We make the following recommendations to the legislature:

1. Shift a portion of state funds currently spent on community supervision caseloads to research-based interventions. The research evidence is clear that certain proven and well-implemented treatment services produce much higher returns on taxpayer dollars.
2. Require state-funded treatment programs for juvenile offenders to demonstrate a quality-control process. The research is also clear that effective quality control is vital to making treatment services work.