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N.J. cops should only lock up juveniles as a last resort under new rules set by AG

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Cops and prosecutors should only lock up young people who have broken the law as a last resort, according to new rules issued Thursday that could decrease the already low number of juveniles detained in New Jersey.

The 33-page directive from the state attorney general's office lists a variety of steps officials should take to keep minors in their communities, including allowing as many as possible to remain at home while awaiting trial.

"If we can turn a youth away from the juvenile justice system, we know they stand a much better chance of turning their life toward success in the long run," state Attorney General Gurbir Grewal said in a statement.

Gov. Phil Murphy said the reform "further strengthens New Jersey's ongoing efforts to eliminate longstanding disparities that have prevented young people in Black and Brown communities from reaching their full potential."

The rules build on several reforms that have diverted thousands of young people away from prison over the past two decades.

About 12,000 juveniles were detained in 2003, according to Grewal's office. Now the total is less than 2,500 every year.

Fewer than 200 young people were incarcerated as of Friday, according to data from the Juvenile Justice Commission. There are also youth prisons operated by the corrections department, which is a separate system.

When a cop sees a juvenile commit a minor offense, the officer should give them a warning face-to-face, and generally not take them into a police station, according to the rules. Cops should also track these "curbside warnings."

If property has been damaged, officers should meet with the young person and his or her family at a police station for a "station house adjustment." That often involves writing up an agreement about how to fix the damage.

The directive also tells cops to do a better job reporting these meetings.

That emphasis on data collection gained support from some critics of the state's juvenile system, including the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice which wants all youth facilities to close.

“We are encouraged that the public release of key station house adjustments data is included in the new Directive so that we can import accountability into the program,” Retha Onitiri, the institute’s community engagement director, said in a statement.

Even when a young person has been charged, prosecutors are encouraged to try rehabilitation and other social service options first, according to the rules.

The directive also includes instructions for how to file charges with the state’s new electronic records system.