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EDITORIAL

The Case for Juvenile Courts

Published: August 13, 2008

This country made a terrible mistake when it began routinely trying youthful offenders as adults. This get-tough approach was supposed to deter crime. But a growing number of government-financed studies have shown that minors prosecuted as adults commit more crimes — and are more likely to become career criminals — than ones processed through juvenile courts.

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The value of specialized courts for young people is underscored in a new report from the Justice Department's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. After evaluating the available research, it concludes that transferring juveniles for trial and sentencing to an adult criminal court has increased recidivism, especially among violent offenders, and has led many young people to a permanent life of crime.

The juvenile justice system was one of the great reforms of the Progressive Era. The push to go back to trying children as adults began in the mid-1990s, when state lawmakers fixated on a few, high-profile crimes by young people and — convinced there was a youth crime wave — came up with a politically convenient solution.

Young people who commit serious, violent crimes deserve severe punishment. But reflexively transferring juvenile offenders — many of whom are accused of nonviolent crimes — into the adult system is not making anyone safer. When they are locked up with adults, young people learn criminal behaviors. They are also deprived of the counseling and family support that they would likely get in the juvenile system, which is more focused on rehabilitation. And once they are released, their felony convictions make it hard for them to find a job and rebuild their lives.

Nearly every state now has laws that encourage prosecutors to try minors as adults. The recent studies of this approach should lead legislatures to abandon these counterproductive policies.

A version of this article appeared in print on August 14, 2008, on page A22 of the New York edition.

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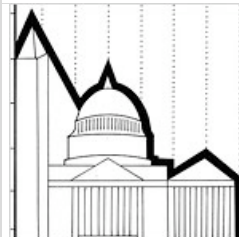
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