
July 12, 2007**EDITORIAL**

Juvenile Justice

One of Congress's most crucial tasks will be to strengthen and update the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act. Passed in 1974, the law required the states to move away from the practice of locking up truants and runaways — and to refrain from placing children in adult jails — in exchange for federal grant dollars.

Congress's goal then was to move the states away from failed policies that often turned young delinquents into hardened criminals and toward a framework based more on mentoring and rehabilitation. But the states have increasingly classified ever larger numbers of young offenders as adults, trying them in adult courts and holding them in adult prisons.

The damage wrought by these policies is vividly outlined in a federally backed study issued this spring. It reports that children handled in adult courts and confined in adult jails committed more violent crime than children processed through the traditional juvenile justice system. Other studies show that as many as half of the juvenile offenders sent to adult courts were not convicted there — or were sent back to the juvenile system, but often after spending time in adult lockups. Equally disturbing is the fact that youths of color are more likely to be sent to adult prisons than their white counterparts.

Reauthorization hearings begin today and members need to listen closely to what the experts are saying. Trying children as adults — except in isolated cases involving extreme violence — is both inhumane and counterproductive.

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