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CDC Report Highlights Dangers of Handling Youth Offenders in Adult Justice System New Support for Returning 17-Year-Olds to Juvenile Court

A new study published today by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), produced by a task force they staffed on Community Preventive Services, makes a strong case for returning youth offenders to the juvenile justice system. According to the report, transferring youth to the adult criminal justice system **significantly increases crime and has a negative effect on public safety**. The report notes that youth who have been previously tried as adults are over one-third more likely to commit crimes than youth retained in the juvenile justice system.

The study's findings have direct implications for juvenile justice policy in Wisconsin, where 17-year-olds have been automatically sent to adult courts and facilities since 1995. "This report provides yet another argument, beyond the wealth of evidence that was already available, that we need to make a change as soon as possible," said Wendy Paget Henderson, juvenile justice policy analyst with the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families (WCCF). "Treating adolescents as adults in the justice system is wrongheaded. Let's correct the mistake that was made back in 1995."

The Task Force's study, released in the CDC's latest *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, unequivocally concludes that transferring youth to the adult system yields bad outcomes. They found that this policy results in, among other things:

- an increase in pretrial violence;
- victimization of juveniles in adult facilities; and
- elevated suicide rates for juveniles incarcerated in adult facilities.

Advocates in Wisconsin have long argued that treating youth as adults in the criminal justice system is both unfair and unwise. Recent breakthroughs in the science of adolescent brain development have shown that youth are biologically inclined to make rash decisions that often land them in trouble with the law. The vast majority of youth offenders mature over the next few years and do not become adult criminals. The new CDC report marks the entry of the public health community—which has no political interest in the issue—into the conversation. From a public health perspective, there are several reasons to return 17-year-olds to the juvenile system, including:

1. Youth prosecuted as adults are more likely to commit crimes later.

2. There is little evidence to support the notion that prosecuting youth as adults has a deterrent effect.
3. Treating youth as adults puts them in direct danger. Youth in adult institutions are at significantly elevated risk of suicide and of becoming victims of assault, including sexual assault.

“Rarely is the evidence for a public policy change as clear as it is in this case,” said Henderson. “The debate should be over. Now it’s time to take action and return 17-year-olds to the juvenile system.”

The Task Force report is available online at http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/mmwr_rr.html. For more information on WCCF’s Justice for Wisconsin Youth project, visit http://www.wccf.org/proj_justice.php.