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**children  
& families**

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**Report by Governor's Commission on Racial Disparity Highlights Need for Policy Changes**  
Returning 17-Year-Olds to Juvenile System among Commission's Recommendations

(Madison)--A report released today by the Governor's Commission on Reducing Racial Disparities in the Wisconsin Justice System highlights the connection between juvenile justice policies and the dramatic overrepresentation of minorities in Wisconsin's corrections system.

"This report states unequivocally what we've known for some time," said Jill Jacklitz, acting executive director of the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families. "Misguided public policy is playing a role in the immense racial disparities we see in the justice system, and children and youth are paying the price."

The Commission's report contains a number of recommendations for addressing racial disparities in the state's justice system. Referencing the findings of last week's Legislative Audit Bureau report on 17-year-olds in the adult justice system, the Commission recommends passage of legislation returning 17-year-olds to the jurisdiction of the juvenile courts, while maintaining the option of referring individual cases to the adult system when appropriate. A bill making that change, SB-401/AB-746, has already been introduced in the state legislature.

The Commission also noted that zero-tolerance school behavior policies are contributing to racial disparity by turning relatively minor offenses at school into criminal behavior, bringing youth into contact with the justice system unnecessarily.

The report also touches on the impact on families of the disproportionate confinement of adults. Incarcerating parents for minor offenses has a devastating effect on their children, while doing little to protect the community.

"We're not doing a good job of balancing public safety with child well-being," said Jacklitz. "We are breaking up families by incarcerating parents who present little or no threat to the public. There are better ways to handle nonviolent cases. The current system punishes children more than it protects communities."