



WISCONSIN COUNCIL ON

**children
& families**

Raising Voices to Make Every Kid Count

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LAB Report Supports Need for Legislation Returning 17-Year-Olds to Juvenile System

(Madison)--The Wisconsin Council on Children and Families today welcomed the addition of a new report from the Legislative Audit Bureau (LAB) to our body of information about current policy pertaining to 17-year-olds in the criminal justice system.

“Clearly the adult corrections system is not working for 17-year-olds or the communities they come from and return to,” said acting WCCF Executive Director Jill Jacklitz. “This report confirms the need for legislation that would return these teenagers to the juvenile system, where they are much more likely to receive the services they need to help them get their lives back together.”

Jacklitz noted that the best research on adolescent brain development suggests that youth are prone to making impulsive choices that get them in trouble, and that the vast majority of young offenders outgrow this propensity and become responsible adults. Placing young people in adult facilities actually *increases* the likelihood that they will become repeat offenders.

The Audit Bureau report makes a number of points that support changing state policy regarding treatment of 17-year-old offenders, including these:

- 17-year-olds in the adult system are in limbo with regard to receiving the treatment and services they need. They are too old to receive the services available to younger offenders through the juvenile corrections system. At the same time, according to the LAB report, they are often unable to access services such as AODA treatment, vocational training, and diversion programs because they are too young to be eligible. It is truly a “Catch-17.”
- Recidivism is higher among 17-year-olds in the adult system than it is for either younger youth in the juvenile system or older teens in the adult system. It is clear that the current policy is not making communities safer.
- Only 5 percent of 17-year-olds in the adult system are there for crimes against persons. The vast majority--*19 out of 20*--are there for other types of offenses, none of them violent, most often crimes against property or status offenses such as truancy and underage drinking. Under the proposed legislation, prosecutors and judges would still have the flexibility to try as adults the small minority of adolescent offenders accused of violent crimes.

The LAB report also highlights the significant racial disparity in Wisconsin’s corrections system. Teens of color are severely overrepresented among 17-year-olds in the adult system, especially

in prison. Another report expected next week from the Governor's Commission on Reducing Racial Disparities in the Wisconsin Justice System will shed further light on this issue.

"The case for returning 17-year-olds to juvenile jurisdiction is overwhelming," said Jacklitz. "It was already overwhelming before the appearance of this report. It's what's best for our youth, and it's what's best for our communities."