

Report: States keeping kids in juvenile system, getting better results Massachusetts eyes reform

Many states are reforming their laws to keep youths out of the adult criminal system, according to a national report that praises efforts in Massachusetts to do the same.

In 37 states the age of adult prosecution is set at 18, according to *State Trends*, a report released by the Campaign for Youth Justice, based in Washington, D.C. In the past five years, 15 states have passed legislation to reduce the number of children in the adult system. In Massachusetts, any 17-year-old accused of a crime, no matter how minor, is treated as an adult. Citizens for Juvenile Justice, a statewide advocacy group, is campaigning to return most 17-year-olds to the juvenile system. The small number accused of serious crimes would still be prosecuted and/or sentenced as adults.

State Trends cites copious research that shows keeping kids in juvenile court is good for public safety. Minors are more likely to reoffend when they are tried as adults and more likely to escalate into violence. The juvenile system has far more extensive rehabilitative services. Furthermore, an adult record can limit educational and career opportunities. *State Trends* also presents disturbing data about the prevalence of suicide and victimization when minors are mixed with adult inmates.

“The question is: When a 17-year-old is caught shoplifting, do you want to teach him not to do it again – or do you want to encourage him to move on to more serious crimes?” said Citizens for Juvenile Justice Executive Director Lael Chester. “The answer is clear, and that’s why 18 is becoming the national standard for adulthood.”

Citizens for Juvenile Justice will release a report this spring detailing the impact that including 17-year-olds to the juvenile system would have on Massachusetts.

“State policymakers are beginning to understand the overwhelming research that kids are not adults and need educational and rehabilitative services,” said Neelum Arya, *State Trends* author and research and policy director for the Campaign for Youth Justice.

In Massachusetts, more than 85 percent of the 17-year-olds entering the adult system are accused of non-violent crimes. Citizens for Juvenile Justice estimates that only one-third of the cases involving 17-year-olds that make it to arraignment result in conviction. Nevertheless, these youth often spend time jailed along with adults.

“The data show that the majority of these kids are not a threat to the public safety,” said Chester. They can be handled more effectively, appropriately and safely as juveniles.”