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LOCAL COMMENT

# Get smarter, not tougher, dealing with youth crime

BY ELIZABETH ARNOVITS • JUNE 25, 2008

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Elizabeth Arnovits



(PAUL LACHINE/Special to the Free Press)

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Michigan's juvenile justice system, like many others across the county, is ripe for a fundamental transformation -- and not a moment too soon. While proper treatment of juveniles can lead to productive lives, our system works to increase crime and limit the future of the youths it is designed to help.



We do know what works. Over the past two decades, innovative programs in Michigan and elsewhere have compiled powerful new evidence on effective ways to combat delinquency.

- First, the number of youths tried in adult courts and punished in adult prisons must be reduced. Every year, roughly 200,000 youths under age 18 are tried in adult courts nationwide. Michigan is one of only 12 states that automatically treat 17-year-olds as adults, and our laws give prosecutors broad power to try juveniles of

any age as adults for serious crimes. More than 500 Michigan youths, ages 15-18, are currently doing time in adult prisons.

Yet research finds that youths tried as adults go on to commit more subsequent crime -- and more violent crime -- than youths of the same age with similar offenses who remain in the juvenile system. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in 2007 concluded: "Transferring juveniles to the adult system is counterproductive as a strategy for preventing or reducing violence."

- Second, we must reduce overreliance on secure confinement and invest in effective community-based services. Only 24% of incarcerated teens across the country are guilty of violent felonies. Some 45% are guilty only of status offenses, probation violations, or lesser crimes unrelated to violence, weapons or drug trafficking.

What happens to these young people? Recidivism studies routinely show that 50% to 80% of youths released from juvenile correctional facilities are rearrested within two to three years -- even those who were not serious offenders prior to confinement. Moreover, locking kids up costs taxpayers -- incarceration typically costs \$200 to \$300 per youth per day, far more than intensive home- and community-based treatment models that often yield superior results.

Counties that have made systematic changes to keep youths in their homes and work with their families find that they can serve more kids with the same budgets, keep communities safe and reduce recidivism. Since 2001, Berrien County has gone from 125 youths in facilities outside the county and out-of-state, to just 18 youths outside the county, and all within Michigan. Wayne County likewise had made dramatic changes, helping drive the number of youths in state training schools from 1,200 in 1996 to 260 today.

- Third, we must keep low-level youthful offenders out of court. Serious juvenile crime rates have plummeted since the mid-1990s, yet the numbers of youths adjudicated delinquent, placed in detention, and sentenced to probation have all grown. Michigan's "zero tolerance" policies in schools have caused countless teens to be prosecuted for fistfights and other teenage behaviors that were once handled informally. The American Psychological Association concluded that zero-tolerance policies are associated with more, not less, misbehavior; and lower, not higher, academic achievement in a 2006 study.

- Finally, we must take vigorous action to reduce the shameful and persistent overrepresentation of youths of color in juvenile justice. A handful of farsighted communities

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have shown that racial disparities can be remedied through focused efforts to review every decision point for underlying biases and to promote practices that equalize treatment. In Michigan, youths of color are three times more likely to be confined than their white peers.

The 2008 Kids Count report found that Michigan has higher rates of placing youths in custody than most other states. We know we can turn this around. It's time to put our knowledge of what works to use. And it's time to provide Michigan youths a measure of justice worthy of the name.

**ELIZABETH ARNOVITS** is executive director of the Michigan Council on Crime and Delinquency. Write to her in care of the Free Press Editorial Page, 615 W. Lafayette, Detroit, MI 48226 or at [oped@freepress.com](mailto:oped@freepress.com).

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bondsareus wrote:

Replying to rjelli:

Replying to justwondering:

*Here we go again with yet another 'study' and theory.....it gets so tiresome.*

*Maybe these youthful offenders needed a mother and father to spank them once in a while, push them to do well in school and just plain care about them. It's called a 'family'--how's that for a plan?*

*And 'color' has nothing to do with a 'family'! Stop dividing us!!*

*A "Family", what a concept, that would never work.....LOL*

Didn't keep your arse out of prison bobbie.  
6/27/2008 7:55:00 AM

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rjelli wrote:

Replying to justwondering:

*Here we go again with yet another 'study' and theory.....it gets so tiresome.*

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6/26/2008 5:48:13 PM

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And 'color' has nothing to do with a 'family!' Stop dividing us!!

6/26/2008 4:37:16 PM

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rjlelli wrote:

Calm down "Bondsy", we don't want you having a stroke, you wouldn't be able to "Report" next Monday.....LOL

6/26/2008 4:34:05 PM

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bondsareus wrote:

Replying to davelaw:

*burrells: if coloreds don't commit more crimes how come Detroit businesses have their windows with bars on them? Every convenience store has bullet proof glass. Businesses in my white community leave merchandise on the sidewalk all night with no pilferage. Leave your house in Detroit and someone might steal your aluminum siding. I am just an old hillbilly that likes to stick to what is real. You should pull your head out of the sand and look at what is really happening. Come to think of it, it looks like your head is firmly implanted in another location.*

Colords? What a colored? What century is it?

6/26/2008 4:07:17 PM

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