

## Jacksonville IL Journal Courier

### New rule for teen offenders makes sense

April 27, 2009 - 11:47 AM

Dealing with teenage lawbreakers is never easy. Authorities need to walk a fine line between suitable punishment and turning near adults into convicts.

A new state law that takes effect next January should help Illinois better distinguish between hard-core offenders and youths who make mistakes.

Starting in 2010, Illinois no longer will try 17-year-olds charged with misdemeanor offenses in adult court. Instead, they will be tried in juvenile court, with access to rehabilitative services. Illinois will join 38 other states and the District of Columbia in considering 18 as the age of adult jurisdiction for misdemeanors.

The law does not change the age requirement for felonies. It does create a task force to examine also raising adult jurisdiction for felonies from age 17 to age 18.

We like this idea. The 17-year-olds are not treated as adults in any other area of law, so it makes little sense to process 17-year-olds through the adult criminal system. In fact, that approach is counterproductive and threatens us all.

Don't believe it? Consider this: Research by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control concluded that trying 17-year-olds in juvenile court keeps communities safer, because youths tried in adult court are 34 percent more likely to re-offend than youths tried in the juvenile court.

Juvenile court has more latitude in providing services, such as mental health, drug treatment, removal from bad situations and more appropriate, community-based services. And, with the hard-core cases, a judge can actually incarcerate a misdemeanor offender in a juvenile prison for longer than possible in an adult court.

The Journal-Courier ceased printing the names of 17-year-old offenders some years ago for these reasons. We did not want high-spirited juvenile high jinks to define a person for the rest of his or her life. With the Internet, that's a very real possibility.

We have thought for some time that giving 17-year-olds the benefit of the doubt in misdemeanor cases is the right thing to do.