

August 23, 2008

LETTER

Juvenile Justice Reforms

To the Editor:

Re “Some Progress on Kids and Jails” (editorial, Aug. 19): You are right to call for higher federal standards that would exclude the routine incarceration of minors with adults, an end to confining truants and an examination of the ethnic and racial disparities in the juvenile justice system. These are key objectives of the MacArthur Foundation’s \$100 million Models for Change initiative.

The juvenile justice system is overburdened and cannot deal adequately with the underlying causes of crime and antisocial behavior. Many young offenders exhibit mental health problems, come from troubled families and attend failing schools.

A comprehensive approach to reforming juvenile justice must recognize the developmental differences between young people and adults, and include the nation’s mental health, child welfare and education systems.

Our Models for Change initiative has shown that screening young offenders for mental health problems, identifying those who have been involved with child welfare services, and providing earlier intervention by schools divert a large proportion to community services. Young offenders in community-based programs show consistently better outcomes than do those who are incarcerated, at a far lower cost to society.

It is time for America to leave an overly punitive, counterproductive approach to juvenile justice behind. But an improved system must address all of the factors that cause delinquent and criminal behavior and provide reliable avenues for rehabilitation. Only broad, concerted strategies will bring lasting solutions.

Jonathan F. Fanton

Chicago, Aug. 20, 2008

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