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EDITORIAL

Children in Adult Jails

Children who are confined to adult jails are at greater risk of being raped, battered or pushed to suicide. They also are more likely to become violent criminals than children handled through the juvenile justice system. When Congress reauthorizes the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974, it should press the states to end this barbaric practice.

The juvenile justice law provides federal aid to states that agree to humanize their often Dickensian systems — and to refrain from placing children in adult jails. The bargain worked well enough until the 1990s, when there was an outbreak of hysteria about so-called super predators and an adolescent crime wave that never materialized.

States classified ever larger numbers of young offenders as adults. Today, laws in more than 40 states permit adult courts to try children as young as 14. Perhaps as many as half the young people who are transferred into the adult system are never convicted as adults — and some are never convicted at all. But by the time the system is finished with them, many will have spent more than six months in adult jails, according to a report by the Campaign for Youth Justice, an advocacy group based in Washington.

Not surprisingly, these young people are much more likely to harm themselves in adult jails than in juvenile facilities. Those who survive often return to their communities as damaged people who are much more likely to commit crimes and return to prison.

The current system is counterproductive and inhumane. Congress could remedy this with one simple fix. It should require all states that receive federal juvenile justice aid to refrain from housing people under the age of 18 in adult jails, except for those accused of the most serious crimes like rape and murder.