

Our Opinion: Young offenders get a better deal

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SINCE 1973, 17-year-olds charged with misdemeanors in Illinois have had their cases heard in adult court. On the surface, that sounds great. It says Illinois is tough on crime.

In practice, though, it is terrible policy. It often means high school juniors and seniors who get caught in an isolated act of youthful stupidity are tagged with a criminal record that follows them throughout their lives and becomes a serious hindrance when job-seeking. A 17-year-old who commits a misdemeanor under the influence of drugs or alcohol is much less likely to receive substance abuse treatment as part of a sentence in adult court, which is designed more for punishment than for rehabilitation.

That is why a bill signed into law last week by Gov. Pat Quinn represents a major step forward for juvenile justice in Illinois.

BEGINNING JAN. 1, 2010, 17-year-olds charged with misdemeanors in Illinois will have their cases adjudicated in juvenile court. Illinois joins 38 states and the District of Columbia in placing 17-year-old misdemeanor offenders in juvenile court. It's not a matter of going soft on crime, but rather a way to prevent minor crimes from having negative, life-altering consequences.

"The basic point is to give high school juniors and seniors who are 17 and make a minor mistake a chance for services in juvenile court instead of giving them an adult criminal record," said Mary Reynolds, policy advocate for the Juvenile Justice Initiative in Springfield.

THE NEW LAW doesn't apply to felonies, though it does establish a task force to study issues related to raising the age of adult jurisdiction for felony charges from 17 to 18. We suspect there is room for similar reform in some nonviolent felony charges, and we eagerly await the task force's report.

Combined with a 2006 law that separated juvenile and adult corrections systems in Illinois, this law represents a major step toward Illinois establishing a more fair and sensible approach to handling young offenders.
