

## Child's play: Congress must act on juvenile justice bill

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The poet William Wordsworth observed that "the child is father of the man." The truth of those words is seen every day in a setting that has no place for poetry -- the criminal justice system and its many crowded halls of despair.

Yet the poet's wisdom has to be accounted for in that part of the system that deals with children and young people, the juvenile justice system.

Truly, the child is father of the man (or woman). Young people are vulnerable, impressionable and sometimes trouble. When they commit crimes, how the authorities treat them can make the difference between whether they later waste their lives or become productive citizens.

The recognition that youths who commit crime deserve a separate system to adjudicate them is more than a century old. The earliest courts focused on rehabilitating young offenders instead of merely punishing them, a philosophy that also recognized that immature kids could hardly be held as responsible for wrongdoing as adults who knew better.

Not always wisely, the pendulum has swung back in recent years with various states passing laws that allow children to be tried as adults for serious offenses, a trend fed by a public opinion unsympathetic to anyone who commits a crime, regardless of age.

While the states are responsible for their juvenile justice systems, the federal government offers funding in return for state adherence to federal standards. In 1974, Congress passed a landmark piece of legislation, the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act, which has been updated over the years, the last time in 2002.

Now it is being reconsidered again as S. 3155 in the Senate Judiciary Committee. This is an opportunity to bring both a greater touch of humanity to the treatment of youth offenders and also incorporate practical steps based on the latest findings on what works best with them.

A co-sponsor of the bill is Pennsylvania Sen. Arlen Specter, who brings a prosecutor's experience and wisdom to discussing its merits. He believes it strikes a balance between providing federal support and guidance to state programs while respecting the individual criminal justice policies of states. In a statement after the bill was introduced last month, Mr. Specter praised the provisions for mentoring and other programs to prevent delinquency and promote rehabilitation.

The bill would make it harder to put kids in adult jails, which gives some officials in Allegheny County pause about whether those charged with very serious crimes should be held with other youthful offenders. But the principle of keeping kids out of adult facilities is an important one and the practical problems for juvenile facilities shouldn't stand in its way.

The legislation will increase federal funding, perhaps by as much as \$272 million for fiscal year 2009, no small thing at a time of deficits. But this is a very good investment for the future. Congress should pass S. 3155.

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