



Tuesday, September 22, 2009, 4am

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Michigan juvenile justice under fire, experts speak to reform

Lansing, MI – Evidence-based practices can save taxpayers \$7 - \$10 for every \$1 invested, according to the Fall 2008 issue of *The Future of Children*, Juvenile Justice, edited by expert Laurence Steinberg with contributions from nine respected academics in this field. Today, experts, policy advisors, and advocates of the Michigan Juvenile Justice Collaborative will host a Legislative Day to propose reforms to the juvenile justice system aimed at increasing cost-efficiency, reducing crime, and creating better outcomes for kids.

“The Future of Children publication highlights ten years of scholarly research that shows a model system is one that considers adolescent development,” explained Elisabeth Donahue, executive director of The Future of Children and guest speaker for the Legislative Day. “Science now validates the juvenile justice system’s century-old premise that kids should be treated differently than adults. As a result, lawmakers and the public are beginning to express second thoughts about a justice system in which age and immaturity are often ignored in calculating criminal punishment,” Donahue points out.

The Michigan Legislature is currently considering juvenile justice legislation that is based on adolescent development and crime prevention research. If enacted, Michigan –for the first time– would have procedures for: evaluating a child’s competency to proceed in delinquency hearings; protecting a teen’s right to make informed decisions about waiving assistance of legal counsel; and sentencing that sets a different standard of criminal responsibility between youth and adults. However, enactment of these bills is by no means assured.

Advocacy groups promoting these evidence-based changes in policy remain concerned that change will not happen and are alarmed by the deep budget cuts being proposed for children’s services that very well may happen. “A budget that severely diminishes pre-school education, abuse and neglect prevention programs, healthcare access, and support services goes directly against what we know works to reduce reoffending and decrease long-term spending on prisons,” states Elizabeth Arnovits, executive director of the Michigan Council on Crime and Delinquency. “Every year of delay in implementing evidence-based reforms funnels more children into the juvenile justice system, which itself is ill-equipped to deal with the complex needs of these kids.”

Despite more than a decade of research on the nature and benefits of evidence-based programs, such programming is still the exception rather than the rule. Only about 5 percent of youth who should be eligible for evidence-based programs participate in one. The roadmap to reform

presented by the Michigan Juvenile Justice Collaborative offers Michigan-specific solutions for updating an antiquated juvenile justice system.

The Michigan Council on Crime and Delinquency (MCCD) is Michigan's only statewide advocacy organization dedicated to assuring that the laws and policies aimed at controlling crime are fair, effective and affordable. For more information, visit www.miccd.org.

The Michigan Juvenile Justice Collaborative is a group of concerned citizens and organizations dedicated to advancing policies and practices that prevent delinquency, promote rehabilitation, and support transitional services for youth involved in the juvenile justice system and raising awareness about the need for best practices that are equitable and just.

The Future of Children is a collaboration of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University and the Brookings Institution. The mission of The Future of Children is to translate the best social science research into information that is useful to policymakers, practitioners, grant-makers, advocates, the media, and students of public policy.