

Point of View:

Published: Dec 20, 2006 12:30 AM  
Modified: Dec 20, 2006 10:31 AM

## Wiser ways to approach teen criminals

ANN BREWSTER

DURHAM - There's been much debate about the N.C. Sentencing and Policy Advisory Commission's recommendation to move 16- and 17-year-olds from the adult criminal justice system to the juvenile justice system. While the debate has been contentious, advocates on both sides appear to have common goals: to increase public safety and lower rates of repeat offenses by teens.

Is the public really safer when 16-year-olds are tried in adult court for minor offenses, and does it really result in lower rates of repeat offenses by teens?

Years of research say no. A 2002 Florida study found that of youths who were transferred to adult courts, 49 percent were arrested again, compared with only 37 percent of youths who remained in the juvenile justice system. Research by a team of Duke experts shows that when youths are placed with other delinquents, such as imprisoned adults, they are more likely to commit additional and more serious crimes.

The Sentencing Commission and lawmakers should consider reframing the debate away from age and focusing more on ensuring that the punishment fits the crime.

Currently, 16-year-olds convicted of offenses such as drug possession, theft and vandalism carry a criminal record for the rest of their lives, making it harder to get good jobs or enter the military. They also risk being placed in adult prisons, which research shows increases the likelihood that they will continue to commit crimes.

Perhaps a wiser approach is to learn from the success of programs such as North Carolina's Youth Drug Treatment Courts, which are proven to work for delinquent juveniles.

Youth Drug Treatment Courts provide an intensive, yearlong program for nonviolent youths. The program mandates involvement from parents and includes bimonthly court appearances, routine drug testing, mandated school attendance, substance abuse treatment and access to community resources.

An evaluation of the program found that the youths are more likely to stay in school, reduce their

### Story Tools

 [Printer Friendly](#)     [Email to a Friend](#)  
 [Enlarge Font](#)     [Decrease Font](#)

### More Columns

- [Warming to a market in carbon](#)
- [Trimming our wastes](#)
- [Winning surge: 30,000 troops; 18 months](#)

### Most Popular Stories

#### Last 24 hours

- [Nifong swearing-in becomes private](#)
- [North and South Carolina feud over access](#)
- [Town's link to Deacs is weak](#)
- [State offers more specialized plates](#)
- [Henderson in the mix for Devils](#)

#### Last 7 days

- [Bare naked ladies, beware](#)
- [Chatter about N.C. tragedies abounds online](#)
- [Cartoon: Dec. 8, 2006: The Escape Clause: Fired Coaches Visit Santa](#)
- [Pressure on Nifong in Duke case](#)
- [Nifong swearing-in becomes private](#)

Ad Links [Buy a link »](#)

### Knee Pain?

Learn about Stryker Knee Replacements  
Designed with Women in Mind  
[www.aboutstryker.com](http://www.aboutstryker.com)

### What's Your Credit Score?

The average U.S. credit score: 675. The cost to see yours: \$0.  
[www.freecreditreport.com](http://www.freecreditreport.com)

### Bankruptcy Lawyers

Consumer bankruptcy. Free Debt Evaluation by experienced bankruptcy attorneys  
[www.LegalHelpers.com](http://www.LegalHelpers.com)

substance use, find jobs and have better relationships with their parents. Research also shows that juveniles who go through this kind of rigorous program are less likely to commit future crimes.

The Sentencing Commission's recommendations to try 16- and 17-year-olds in juvenile courts may provide a wiser, more cost-effective approach to public policy. However, if not followed up by meaningful, evidence-based approaches that reduce crime and set teens on a path to successful adulthood, age doesn't matter.

(Dr. Ann Brewster is a research associate at the Center for Child and Family Policy at Duke University. She was one of the lead researchers in a process evaluation of the N.C. Youth Drug Treatment Courts.)

**All rights reserved. This copyrighted material may not be published, broadcast or redistributed in any manner.**

© Copyright 2006, The News & Observer Publishing Company  
A subsidiary of [The McClatchy Company](#) 