

Juvenile Detention

- Dan Rosenberg

There are some scary things going on in the world today. Looking at CNN, there are stories about the threat of the North Korean nuclear program, bombings in Afghanistan, and turmoil in the economy. But a story that struck me recently was one involving two preteens, who conspired to hurt a fellow classmate. The interesting thing about this story was that these children, these fifth graders, were being tried as adults in court. I found this astounding that, even with such a heinous crime, these children could be tried as adults. After a bit of digging, I found that children as young as 10 years old can be tried as adults in America. More than anything, that scares me as a member of American society; how can we have our young people committing larceny, assault, or even murder?

The first part of this that jumps out to me is the availability of illegal substances and activities to teens and preteens. Drug and alcohol usage is increasingly more common amongst young people; often these substances act as a gateway, putting juveniles on a path of crime. Juvenile courts, in order to combat these issues, focus on rehabilitation. But if tried as adults, the adolescents often don't have access to these youth-oriented rehabilitation programs. No matter how violent or terrible their crimes, we cannot abandon these children to a cell. Whether it be through re-education, therapy, or any other type of rehabilitation, we have a responsibility to help these lost children, not relegate them to a cell for the rest of their lives.

The inherent purpose of juvenile courts is to not only punish for past crimes, but to prevent further ones. Instead of harsher punishments, more preemptive measures is the better tactic to take in regards to youth crime. Improvement of schools in high-risk neighborhoods is the first step. More education, and safer school environments, is a deterrent against a youth descending into crime. The second step is decreasing the availability of firearms, drugs, and other vices to adolescents. This prevents both the means and the reason for juveniles to commit many of the crimes common amongst this demographic. The final step is re-educating parents, in the same high-risk areas, on how to prevent their children from being put into potentially criminal situations. Preventive tactics, instead of reactive ones, can help not only stop future crimes, but also help young people who have committed them in the past.

Simply put, juveniles are not adults. It is a scientific fact that brain development is not completed until after 18 years of age, and the decision-making and rationalization portions of the brain do not become fully developed until later in life. It's time for the judicial system to be pro-active, and, instead of waiting until it's too late to help children at risk, stop adolescent crime in its tracks.