

Editorial: Treat 17-year-olds charged with nonviolent crimes as juveniles

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We've been through the push to "get tough on crime" - and found that it has benefits and problems. Now, the justice system is getting smart on crime. That doesn't mean less tough, but it's a better alternative.

One example among many is a bill in the state Legislature to move 17-year-olds charged with nonviolent crimes into the juvenile system. Under current law, all 17-year-olds charged with any crime, no matter the severity, are sent to adult court.

The bill, which recently passed an Assembly committee with unanimous, bipartisan consent, would keep 17-year-olds charged with violent crimes in the adult system. And it would give prosecutors and judges the option of moving 17-year-olds accused of more serious non-violent crimes into adult court.

The purpose of criminal justice, when dealing with offenders, isn't solely punishment. It's supposed to be rehabilitation, too.

It makes sense that a 17-year-old offender convicted of a nonviolent crime would be better off getting treatment or in an appropriate rehabilitation program than in an adult jail or prison. In fact, it also makes sense that a 17-year-old in an adult prison would come out of it much less likely to find a job and integrate back into society.

In most other ways, we don't consider 17-year-olds to be adults. If accused of a violent crime, public safety has to take precedence and an adult court is appropriate. In other cases, juvenile court and alternatives to incarceration serve the public best.

We urge the Legislature to heed the support of the Assembly committee, as well as the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families, the State Bar of Wisconsin and the State Public Defender, and pass this bill when it returns for its session in January.