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Rehabilitating young offenders

Editorials

Ohio and Kentucky are poised for significant - and promising - changes in both philosophy and practice in their juvenile justice systems.

Both states are moving toward a more flexible and personal approach to dealing with young offenders. They're stressing treatment over punishment, keeping the youth closer to their homes and considering a wider range of factors before making sentencing recommendations.

They're also pledging to do a better job of sorting out youths convicted of minor offenses from serious offenders, and placing them in settings that are more appropriate to their level of risk to the community.

The result: young offenders should be safer in state programs, and in for shorter periods of time. Staff should be safer, too.

These systems are not aimed at the hardest of the hard-core offenders who are sent to adult court. Those in the juvenile system are youthful offenders the courts already have determined are salvageable.

In Ohio, some youths will move to small Cognitive-Behavioral Centers - intensive, short-term programs intended to keep low-risk offenders closer to home and out of large state facilities. The centers, which will serve 10 to 12 youths and have a more personal and less institutional nature, will be designed and monitored by the University of Cincinnati's Division of Criminal Justice. UC faculty are also helping develop a statewide assessment tool that will help courts better determine placement, treatment and risk.

In Kentucky, juvenile justice officials say they expect to see quicker return of youths to their communities and lower recidivism rates. Sen. Gerald Neal, a Louisville lawmaker who sponsored legislation to create a separate juvenile justice department, called the moves "a return to rationality."

Historically, public sentiment toward young offenders has shifted between a rehabilitative emphasis and a get-tough, zero tolerance approach. But through it all, certain truths of adolescence persisted. Teenagers do poorly in large and anonymous settings. They do best with a consistent group of adults who form close-knit relationships with them. They need help transitioning back into their families and communities. And permanent rehabilitation requires treatment and support rather than isolation and punishment.

The trick is having that philosophy articulated at the top of the juvenile justice system. "If you have a deterrence and get-tough model, then that's what the staff at youth facilities will do," said Edward J. Latessa, professor and head of UC's Division of Criminal Justice. "If you have a human services model, that's the kind of staff you'll attract."

Treating young offenders as individuals and emphasizing rehabilitation over punishment isn't getting soft on crime. It's getting smart on kids. In the long run, it's the best hope of keeping them out of a revolving door of re-offending.