

JUVENILE CRIME

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Engler's plan needs more emphasis on prevention

He measures Gov. John Engler will propose tomorrow to deal with serious juvenile crime seem long on punishment, but short on prevention, treatment and rehabilitation. A better balance is warranted.

The need for a more effective approach to youth crime is undeniable: Although overall rates of crime — including violent offenses such as murder and rape — are declining in Michigan, according to new State Police figures, the percentage of arrested suspects who are under 16 continues to increase. Gang activity is spreading alarmingly throughout the state.



Lock-'em-up rhetoric on crime always plays well politically. But we concede the argument made by Gov. Engler — and many lawmakers, prosecutors, judges and victims' rights advocates — that some young felons are so brutal or incorrigible that they demand to be treated as adults in the name of adequate public safety.

Still, we wish more attention were paid to the other side of the coin: that the best way to reduce juvenile crime is to intervene early enough in the lives of at-risk youths to prevent it, and that we must not be unduly quick to dismiss the possibility of rehabilitating kids who have made bad mistakes. That isn't bleeding-heart liberalism but basic economics, since preventing crime is cheaper and more efficient than responding after it's too late.

The governor would permit prosecutors and judges to charge and sentence offenders as young as 14 as adults for a wide variety of violent and drug-related crimes. Judges could impose a new mandatory minimum sentence of 25 years on some juvenile offenders, with no possibility of parole. Mr. Engler would create a "punk

prison" for youths considered too dangerous for standard juvenile detention facilities. Major crimes no longer would be expunged from juveniles' records.

Gov. Engler offers sensible ideas — such as permanently barring juveniles convicted of violent crimes from owning guns — along with ones that sound better than they might actually work, such as holding parents responsible for some kinds of misbehavior by their children. But overall, his package emphasizes cracking down on juvenile crime after the fact, rather than controlling its occurrence.

Administration officials complain that Michigan's juvenile justice system has grown unequipped to cope with hardened offenders, especially in Wayne County, who return to the streets at 19 to resume their criminal careers. But is the state doing all it reasonably can do to enable the system to help those juveniles who truly want to turn their lives around, or to minimize young people's contacts with the system?

A group of child advocates that calls itself the Coalition for Juvenile Justice Reform has offered a series of useful options to the get-tough model. They include improvements in prenatal and child care, preschool and parenting education, dropout prevention, classroom training in conflict resolution, counseling for families afflicted by domestic violence and child abuse and neglect, and job training and education for young offenders. It's hard to make bumper stickers or stump slogans of such proposals, but all are cost-effective measures.

Engler administration officials say the governor acknowledges the importance of early intervention to prevent juvenile crime, and will have proposals along those lines this fall. He needs to follow through on that commitment, since an open-ended expansion of Michigan's prison system — adult or juvenile — is an "investment" state taxpayers can't afford.