

Western Voices 2013, English 280, First Place, (Professor, Dr. Timothy Helwig)

It's Time to Abandon the Sinking Ship: Juvenile Justice Reform in the United States

Sean Kincaid

Today's youth shall inherit this nation. For this reason, it is imperative that society prepares them to face the challenges that come with adult life. In general, the United States does an exceptional job developing youth through schools, youth organizations, and job opportunities that help them become functional members of society. One demographic of youth that we are failing miserably is the youth that find themselves in our current juvenile justice system. This system, which was originally created in order to save children from a life of crime through treatment and rehabilitation, is now focusing on getting tough and punishing juveniles. This shift in focus led us to become the only nation on the planet that sentences children to life sentences without the possibility of parole ("Young Offenders"). For decades now, this new policy of locking up juvenile offenders has proven ineffective and costly to both society and the juvenile subjected to this system. Countless lives, families, and communities have been ruined due to this catastrophic failure of a juvenile justice system and the United States can't remain on the course of incarceration any longer. The public along with legislators should push to drop the punitive model of justice for juveniles because it is extremely costly, ineffective, and often damaging to the youth. It is time to return to the treatment model because it has already been proven to be cost efficient, highly successful in lowering recidivism rates in many states, and the youth are still developing and can be changed to better prepare them to become functioning adults that contribute to our society.

Up until the late 1700's to early 1800's, juveniles in America were treated the same as adults in the justice system. Even children under ten years old could be sentenced to death. Legislators began to realize that juvenile offenders differed from "hardened adult criminals," and therefore decided that there was a need to handle their cases differently. Starting in the mid 1800's an entire juvenile justice system has evolved with separate courts, sentencing, and facilities for exclusively treating juveniles (Charles 2). In the past few decades, however, increased juvenile crime led to a change in policy. The media began to portray juvenile offenders as evil and the greatest danger to communities. The American public cried out for justice and for politicians to crack down on juvenile crime. Lawmakers began focusing on locking up the youth, with keeping them off the streets being the number one goal (Charles 3). Sentencing only became harsher over the years due to a lack of success with this new policy of punitive justice. Now, early teens can be convicted as adults in court and often

brains are not fully developed, particularly in areas that control reasoning and risk taking” (“Young Offenders”). Mauer also pointed out that this is the exact reason that there are age limits on certain activities that demand maturity and responsibility such as driving, drinking, and

[bench/whatittakes.html](#)>.

Brinkman, Laura, Olaghere Ajira, and Schirmer Sarah, comps.

bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbG12ZQ%3d%3d#db=aph&AN=80132015>.

Liptak, Adam. "Supreme Court Revisits Issue of Harsh Sentences for Juveniles." *The New York Times: U.S. Edition*. The New York Times, 20 Mar. 2012. Web. Dec. 2012.

<