

Jailing youth with adults archaic, impractical

By Marian Wright Edelman
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In the United States, young people under age 18 can't vote, purchase cigarettes or alcohol, drive alone without restrictions in some states, or participate in many other activities our society reserved for adults. Children under age 18 aren't legally considered adults yet, and as a result, many laws are designed especially to protect them. But there is a crucial exception: Almost 250,000 young people under 18 are transferred into the adult criminal justice system each year. Children and youths are being criminalized at younger and younger ages and often for behavior that used to be handled in the principal's office.

During the late 1980s and 1990s, major policy changes in virtually every state re-categorized many juvenile offenses as adult crimes and juvenile offenders as adult criminals. Many Americans might assume that only young people who commit the most violent crimes are at risk of being tried as adults and incarcerated with adult prisoners. But the majority of teens who are tried and sentenced in adult court aren't the serious, violent, chronic offenders who might have been subject to the death penalty, which was only recently struck down for juvenile offenders.

Juvenile court judges have always had the power to evaluate those kinds of serious violent offenders and send them to the adult sys-

tem if they thought it was warranted. Today many states have passed new laws that require automatic transfers of juvenile offenders to adult court — without any individualized evaluation of their cases — based simply on the nature of the offense or the young person's age.

In many states, prosecutors are required to file certain cases in adult court even if it's against their better judgment. In fact, nearly 90 percent of youths transferred to the adult system nationwide are there because of a lowered age of adulthood in 13 states.

This means they are automatically tried in the adult system solely because their state has lowered the age of adulthood in the criminal code. In these states, any young person accused of an offense who is 17-years-old or 16-years-old in three of the 13 states will be sent into the adult criminal justice system for any offense whether it is serious or not.

Each year, as many as 218,000 youths under age 18 are automatically excluded from the juvenile justice system solely because of their age.

This growing trend is threatening to get even worse: Right now, both the House and Senate are considering bills that would make transferring youths easier and more likely at the federal level. The House version has already been passed. It was introduced partly in response to recent gang activity involving

teenagers and young adults. But will treating more juveniles as adult criminals help stop juvenile crime or simply provide them worse criminal mentors?

In reality, transferring youths has already been proven to be a failed public policy. The facts show that trying and sentencing youths in adult criminal court is harmful rather than helpful. Research shows over and over that prosecuting young people as adults increases rather than reduces youth crime. Jails and prisons are crime schools. We already know that in comparison to young people prosecuted as juveniles, young people prosecuted as adults are more likely to commit a greater number of crimes upon release; commit a higher number violent crimes upon release; and commit crimes sooner upon release.

Not only is it not effective public policy, but holding youths in adult prisons and jails also has dangerous consequences for the young people themselves. Compared to youths held in juvenile facilities, young people incarcerated with adults are five times as likely to be sexually assaulted by other inmates; are twice as likely to be beaten by staff; are 50 percent more likely to be assaulted with a weapon; and are eight times as likely to commit suicide.

What does work? Prevention is one key piece of the puzzle. Research clearly shows the effectiveness of focused family interven-

tions in saving children and money. Some school-based interventions, including prevention programs aimed at bullying and drug abuse, and some sound mentoring programs like Big Brothers Big Sisters of America have also been proven effective. Above all, studies have shown that comprehensive, collaborative and locally tailored strategies are the most effective in preventing gang and youth violence.

Existing state legislation is more than adequate to address youth violence comprehensively. Increased federalization of juvenile crime and increasing the numbers of juveniles transferred to the adult system are not the answer. The responsibility of Congress to the young people of this nation and to all citizens in ensuring public safety requires finding and implementing known effective solutions.

Why are some policymakers insisting on approaches that lack any evidence of actually deterring and reducing violent youth crime and advocating methods that punish without protection? Why is it that the only thing our nation will guarantee every child is a detention or jail cell after they get into trouble? When are we going to provide all children the healthy and fair start in life that keeps them out of jail?

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Rice prods Egyptian brass to explore democracy

Special to Sentinel-Voice

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice prodded Middle Eastern leaders Monday to reform their governments, declaring that the U.S. was no longer willing to accept regional stability at the expense of political freedom.

"Throughout the Middle East, the fear of free choices can no longer justify the denial of liberty," Rice said in an address as notable for its setting — Egypt, an important U.S. ally — as for its content. "It is time to abandon the excuses that are made to avoid the hard work of democracy."

Egypt will hold its first multiparty election this fall, but opposition groups say the voting is a sham set up to favor the ruling party of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

"Liberty is the universal longing of every soul, and democracy is the ideal path for every nation," Rice told a polite but restrained audience of about 600 invited government officials, academics and others at American University.

As she has done in speeches in the United States and elsewhere since taking over from Colin Powell in January, Rice said the United States is just as committed to democratic change and open elections in the Middle East as elsewhere in the world. She pointed to elections in Iraq, the Palestinian territories and Lebanon.

"For 60 years, my country, the United States, pursued stability at the expense of democracy in this region, here in the Middle East, and we achieved neither," she said. "Now, we are taking a different course. We are supporting the democratic aspiration of all people."

Her message was mixed, however.

For all of Rice's forceful rhetoric, she pulled some punches when addressing the progress of democratic change in Egypt and Saudi Arabia. And she refused to see representatives of Egypt's largest Islamic opposition movement, the Muslim Brotherhood, because the group is banned by the Mubarak government.

The Muslim Brotherhood, like several smaller opposition groups, criticizes the United States for being too cozy with Mubarak. Some opposition figures boycotted a discussion session she held after her speech at American University in Cairo. Afterward, she flew to Saudi Arabia.

In her remarks, Rice strongly rebuked two countries — Syria and Iran — that have long been on the outs with Washington. She called Syria a "police state" that has acted as a foreign master in neighboring Lebanon. On Iran, she said, "The appearance of elections does not mask the organized cruelty of Iran's theocratic state."

Rice drew no applause



Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice gestures during her speech at the American University in Cairo, AUC, Monday.

during the university address. But there was applause for audience questions about alleged Israeli human-rights abuses against the Palestinians and about mistreatment of the Qur'an at U.S. military prisons.

One protester who demonstrated during Rice's appearance said the United States is not serious about democracy.

"The American regime has to be boycotted as long as they are occupying Arab and Islamic lands," said activist Abdel Hamid Kandil. "Today, Condoleezza Rice was talking about free and fair elections. How can this be serious if there are no candidates and no elections in the first place?"

Among those who attended Rice's speech, Sanaa Eid, an American University alumna and former banker, said the secretary's talk left

her hoping for more answers.

"We are very, very eager to be like them in democracy," she said of the United States. "But I don't feel that this brings results."

"Governments in the Middle East are mostly mon-

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against affirmative action and reparations as racism in reverse.

The decision that Brown and Thomas made to seek personal upward mobility at all cost, in the face of personal contradictions and the pain to their people that it presented, explains the tenacity that both exhibited in the face of massive rejection to their goal by Blacks. It is the only thing that can explain why Thomas would take a "high tech lynching" and Brown would be defeated, yet hang on at all cost until she won. Indeed, both hung on fiercely when their very dignity was at stake, proving that it was not just the conservative movement that attracted them, but their own sense of what it meant to attain personal status in life.

archies or family dynasties, as in Saudi Arabia, or centralized nearly one-party regimes, as in Egypt. The United States lists both Saudi Arabia and Egypt as human-rights abusers and has cited Saudi Arabia as a nation that does little to combat human trafficking.

Rice praised Mubarak for moving to hold elections, but said she is concerned for the future of Egypt's reform because of violence visited on "peaceful supporters of democracy." Last month, Mubarak supporters pulled and kicked opposition activists in the street during a preparatory referendum.

"President Mubarak has unlocked the door for change. Now, the Egyptian government must put its faith in its own people," she said. "The Egyptian government

must fulfill the promise it has made to its people and to the entire world by giving its citizens the freedom to choose."

Rice called for an end to emergency laws in Egypt, a frequent demand of the opposition and reformers. The laws give police wide powers to make arrests, among other actions. "The day must come when the rule of law replaces emergency decrees," she said.

Rice acknowledged that the United States has an imperfect record on democracy, including what she called rare lapses by U.S. officials in the Qur'an incidents and at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq.

"Democracy does not guarantee that people will not do bad things," she said at a press conference before her speech.

There is a lesson in this. Many choices come our way in life, but greatness — not just public adulation — comes when you sacrifice the regressive path that leads only to personal achievement at all cost and take the choice that empowers people, rather than their oppressors. I am often reminded when I hear criticism about our civil rights leaders that to a person, they could all be doing something else, in most cases, something far more lucrative and safe. But they have, instead, made the hard choice to help our people achieve progress. I know which choice leads to justice, which one that is devalued by our opposition, and therefore, which one to teach the children will lead to our freedom.

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