

From the office of
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SB 1008

Opinion: It's time to make our justice system fairer and more effective for youth offenders

Oregonians want a criminal justice system that is fair, results-driven and ensures fewer victims in the future. Which is why it is important to let research – not fear – guide us when we weigh making changes to it.

In 1994, voters passed Measure 11, requiring anyone charged with certain serious crimes - including youth aged 15-17 - to be prosecuted in adult court and serve mandatory minimum sentences if convicted.

The results? Not great. **Oregon data shows youth sent to adult prisons are more likely to re-offend, and Measure 11 also has had a disproportionate impact on youth of color. It's time to make sensible changes, specific to youth, which will make our neighborhoods safer and the system fairer.** Senate Bill 1008A will do just that.

We have learned a great deal since 1994 about what works for youth in the justice system, and how to reduce the risk of future victimization. We now know the human brain gets built in an ongoing construction project that continues into our mid-20s. The period of especially rapid brain growth during adolescence affects teens' judgment, decision-making, and behavior. If we want youth in the justice system to mature into responsible adults, we need to provide them with safe, supportive environments where they can learn and practice new skills. We must not only teach them things like math and reading, but also the soft skills adults take for granted - how to manage conflict, handle emotions, and make good decisions.

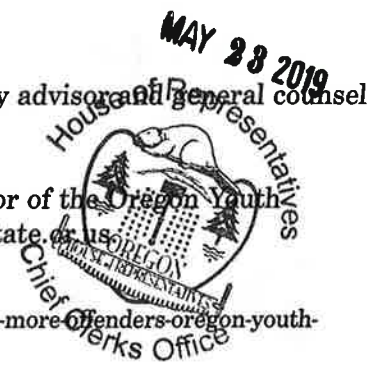
Policymakers recognize youth are different. Which is why most youth sentenced under Measure 11 are sent to youth correctional facilities run by the Oregon Youth Authority, even though – legally speaking – they are committed to the Department of Corrections. At OYA, youth receive treatment and access to a broad range of educational and vocational opportunities – and a focus on the soft skills needed for adulthood.

At age 25, if youth have not completed their sentence, they transfer to one of DOC's adult facilities, where treatment and educational opportunities are far more limited. **Worse, data shows youth who transfer to DOC are twice as likely to be re-convicted for a new felony within three years of release as those who finish their sentences at OYA.** By making reasonable changes to Measure 11, as proposed in SB 1008A, we can reduce future victimization by ensuring more youth stay with OYA.

Judges will decide whether youth are handled in juvenile or adult court. Most Measure 11 youth will have the opportunity to be considered for conditional release after they serve at least half of their sentence – giving them the motivation to engage in rehabilitation and earn the opportunity to return to their communities. **In the past 25 years, research has taught us a lot about how youth end up in the justice system and how to keep them from coming back. It's time to use that knowledge to make our justice system fairer and more effective.**

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