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## **Report critical of way Montana treats juvenile offenders**

HELENA (AP) - An American Bar Association report, critical of the way Montana treats juvenile defendants, said the state system basically assumes the offenders are guilty.

The 88-page report, released Wednesday, examined a handful of states, including Montana.

It said juveniles unable to hire their own lawyers often meet with a court-appointed lawyer only minutes before they go before a judge. Some public defenders for juveniles assume their clients are guilty, and go along with punishments suggested by probation officers.

Jim Oppedahl, who oversees the district courts that run the juvenile system, said an ongoing legal case against the state regarding public defenders for adults prohibits him from commenting on the report.

But another state official said he took issue with some parts of the report that he said erroneously cited cracks in state's juvenile corrections system.

Steve Gibson, administrator of the Department of Correction's Juvenile Corrections Division, did agree parts of the system could be studied, though.

"We will be writing a letter to the president of the American Bar Association," Gibson said. "Some of these findings are not based on fact."

For instance, he said the report stated that girls tried as adults in Montana may be sent out of state for placement. But Montana doesn't send any women inmates out of state, Gibson said.

Gibson also criticized a finding that said up to 90 percent of juveniles behind bars suffer from some kind of emotional disturbance. Gibson said he doesn't know where that statistic came from as mentally ill youth are generally not placed in the state's two juvenile correctional facilities.

And Gibson said the state offers a lot of support to juveniles on parole, such as inpatient treatment, outpatient therapy and a program designed to ease their transition from correctional facilities to life on the outside. Consequently, he said, the rate at which young Montana convicts commit new crimes is quite low, about 5 percent.

"I think it's very important to look at this," Gibson said. "I just don't know where their information came from."