

The New York Times
November 3, 2003

Lawyers for Juveniles

Editorial

Forty years ago, in *Gideon v. Wainwright*, the Supreme Court recognized that criminal defendants have a right to counsel. This principle applies with special force to young defendants, who are least likely to understand their situations, and who are making decisions that could forever change the course of their lives. But the American Bar Association, in new studies, has found that juvenile defendants have woefully inadequate representation.

The studies evaluate the juvenile defense systems in Maine, Maryland, Montana, North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Washington. There were common problems. Young defendants often lack lawyers at key stages, or meet them for the first time in court. The lawyers often have excessive caseloads and inadequate investigative resources. And many of the lawyers are not trained about alternatives to incarceration for their juvenile clients.

Denying young people adequate legal representation means they are being rushed off to prison when substance-abuse programs, and more effective approaches to punishment, might be better for them and for society.

The bar association, which has already studied six other states' systems, offers solid suggestions for reform. States should do more to investigate the problems in juvenile representation. Juvenile court judges should work harder to ensure that young defendants understand their right to counsel, and are represented at key stages. And state bar associations should do more training of lawyers representing juveniles.

These systems need more resources. "Conveyor belt justice," as the president of the A.B.A., Dennis Archer, calls it, falls short of the promise the Supreme Court made in *Gideon*, and wastes a precious chance to get young defendants on the right track before it is too late.