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### **Badge of shame**

If you start with the assumption that many adolescents and teenagers who have gotten into trouble with the law still have a chance for rehabilitation before becoming career criminals, a report this week by a national juvenile-justice group will deeply concern you.

For years, many politicians have reveled in Florida's reputation as giving no quarter to lawbreakers, no matter how young. In the 1980s and '90s, citizens had grown sick and tired of a juvenile-justice system that coddled dangerous young offenders who came to the public's attention after committing serious, sometimes heinous crimes. In responding to the crisis, however, our legal and political systems seem to have lost sight of a basic responsibility: the determined pursuit of justice.

A report by the National Juvenile Defender Center concluded that Florida's juvenile-justice system is riddled with inexperienced judges and lawyers, attorneys with 'staggering' caseloads, and shortages of money and 'political will.' The Florida Bar, Florida Supreme Court and Florida Public Defender Association supported the study, which also concluded that indigent juvenile defendants often were pressured into waiving their constitutional right to counsel and pleading guilty. 'This often occurs with a wink and a nod - or even encouragement - from judges,' the report said. Besides offending any reasonable sense of justice, this impairment in our system should alarm Floridians for purely practical reasons.

Our jails and prisons are already bulging. Failure to divert more young offenders from continued criminal behavior means more tax money for corrections instead of for schools.

A juvenile conviction can prevent someone from enlisting in the military or obtaining a student loan - a high hurdle blocking his or her ability to get the training required to become a productive citizen.

Few would argue for a return to a juvenile-justice system that fails to deal effectively with tough young thugs. Juvenile-justice advocates say many of the system's current problems could be alleviated with money to hire more judges and lawyers, as well as a recognition within the public-defender system that juvenile courts must be more than a training ground for young attorneys.

A bill in the Florida Senate this year would have helped by requiring that all children charged as juveniles be assisted by counsel, but it died in the House.

Political leaders - including those now running for top statewide posts who prevail on Nov. 7 - routinely pledge their fealty to Florida's children. Here's one more opportunity for them to put more money where their mouths are.