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Florida's Juvenile Justice System Needs To Be Tough - And Fair

More than a decade after Florida put some teeth into its juvenile justice system, a new report from the National Juvenile Defender Center raises questions about how well the wheels of justice turn here for accused adolescents. The findings show that while Florida has toughened up, its juvenile justice system remains seriously flawed.

Oftentimes accused juveniles receive inadequate or nonexistent legal representation when entering pleas in criminal court - decisions that carry lifelong implications. For example, juvenile records can keep young people from serving in the military, getting financial aid for college or being hired for some jobs.

In an effort to move tens of thousands of juvenile cases through the process quickly and cheaply, Florida's juvenile courts rely on kids waiving their right to counsel and pleading to the charges, analysts found. Often the youngster makes this decision without consulting an attorney and on the advice of parents who can't afford an attorney but don't qualify for a public defender.

In one outrageous case, the authors observed a 7-year-old waive his right to legal counsel.

Floridians made it clear a decade ago that young offenders shouldn't be coddled, but with so much at stake, the juvenile justice system ought to be fair.

Juveniles shouldn't be left without legal protection simply to make the system more efficient.

The Florida Legislature could have remedied the situation last year with a bill requiring all young defendants be given attorneys for the duration of their court proceedings. The measure passed the Senate but failed in the House. This report gives good reason to revive that effort.

The report also challenges the shackling of young offenders in juvenile court, which evokes disturbing imagery but fails to acknowledge the security risks some juveniles pose. Some young offenders are as big as adults and considerably more impulsive.

Courtroom security shouldn't be compromised because some find it unseemly that "children" are put in shackles. The shackling of offenders should remain at the discretion of security personnel and judges.

Juvenile court is serious business, and Florida was right to treat juvenile crimes more seriously. This report is good reason to take a fresh look at juvenile court practices and make sure they are appropriately tough but also fair.