



Study Finds Juvenile Defense System Flaws

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TALLAHASSEE - Florida courts routinely let indigent juvenile defendants give up their right to legal representation, and when children do get lawyers, they often are inexperienced and overworked, a study released Monday says.

The National Juvenile Defender Center's report also faults Florida for putting the least experienced judges on the juvenile bench, pressuring children to plead guilty and prejudicing their cases by shackling them in court.

The study was conducted with support from the state Supreme Court, Florida Bar and Florida Public Defender Association. It concluded efforts to improve the system have been limited by money and "lack of political will."

The study's authors, center director Patricia Puritz and Cathryn Crawford of Northwestern University Law School's Children and Family Justice Center, make several recommendations. They include consultation with a lawyer before children can waive their right to counsel because they often fail to realize the consequences of a juvenile conviction.

"Youthful indiscretion or misbehavior can be a lifetime sentence to lower socio-economic status and can place future limitations on housing, education, employment and other opportunities," they wrote.

Observers sent to courts in 10 of Florida's 20 circuits found children routinely waived their right to a lawyer "with a wink and a nod - or even encouragement - from judges."

"Most of the recommendations are very good ideas; the findings are well warranted," said Carlos Martinez, vice president of the public defender association and chief assistant public defender in Miami.

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National Juvenile Defender Association: www.njdc.info/index.php

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