

# Medical review finds laws allowing youth tried as adults ineffective at improving public safety, and associated with increased violence

## Overview:

In response to the public health concerns associated with violence committed by youth in the United States, the Task Force on Community Preventive Services recently reviewed studies on the transfer of youth to the adult criminal justice system. The Task Force conducted a systematic review to determine the validity of the theory that transferring youth to the adult criminal justice system deters youth from committing subsequent crimes (individual deterrence), and the theory that fear of the perceived severity of the adult criminal justice prevents youth from committing crimes in the first place (general deterrence). The review, *Effects on Violence of Laws and Policy Facilitating the Transfer of Juveniles from the Juvenile Justice System to the Adult Justice System*, was published in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* (April 2007).

## Task Force Recommendation:

Overall, the Task Force recommends against laws or policies facilitating the transfer of juveniles from the juvenile justice to the adult judicial system for the purpose of reducing violence.

## Findings:

**Transferring juveniles to the adult justice system is counterproductive as a strategy for deterring subsequent violence:** The Task Force found strong evidence that youth who have been previously tried as adults are more likely to commit additional violent crimes. The weight of evidence shows that youth who are transferred from the juvenile court system to the adult criminal system are approximately 34% more likely than youth retained in the juvenile court system to be re-arrested for violent or other crime.

**Insufficient evidence that transferring youth to the adult criminal system prevents youth crime:** The Task Force found insufficient evidence to justify assertions that trying youth as adults prevents youth from committing crimes in the first place.

**Strengthened transfer policies may be harmful for those juveniles who experience transfer:** The review notes that other violent outcomes may result from the transfer of youth to the adult system. These violent outcomes include an increase in pretrial violence, victimization of juveniles in adult facilities, and elevated suicide rates for juveniles incarcerated in adult facilities.

**Costs/benefits unknown:** The review notes a rarity of studies that compare the costs of transferring youth to the adult system against the costs of retaining youth in the juvenile justice system. While the review questions the motive for evaluating harmful interventions (transfer laws and policies), it suggests that a cost-benefit comparison of the adult and juvenile justice systems may foster a constructive debate over the economic consequences of reform.

## Task Force:

The Task Force on Community Preventive Services is a 15-member non-Federal task force supported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). CDC scientists review the effectiveness of health care interventions for the Task Force that then makes recommendations to the public health community and health care delivery organizations. The recommendations generated by the Task Force are combined to form the *Guide to Community Preventive Services*, which includes a section on violence.

## For more information:

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