

Seventeen-year-olds are juveniles. So why should they be treated as adults when they commit nonviolent crimes?

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There are any number of compelling reasons why a 17-year-old who has committed a violent crime should be tried and, if convicted, imprisoned as an adult, though mitigating circumstances could intrude in cases.

But there are no reasons, compelling or otherwise, why a 17-year-old nonviolent offender who commits a minor crime should be treated as an adult. This is a recipe for turning a youthful offender into a habitual adult offender.

Sen. Jon Erpenbach (D-Middleton) and Rep. Donald Friske (R-Merrill) are proposing legislation that would treat such nonviolent offenders as what they are: juveniles. Currently, a Wisconsinite who is 17 or older and who commits a crime is subject to adult trial and punishment. This bill would raise that age to 18.

This would be good for both the young nonviolent offender and for the rest of us. But don't take our word for it. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released a report in December that found that young offenders who are tried and detained in the adult system are a third more likely to be arrested later for a crime than those youths who go through the juvenile system. The Journal Sentinel's Dani McClain reported on the study in December (www.jsonline.com/692129).

The bill deserves full Senate and Assembly approval. Unfortunately, because a new tax is involved, that is not as certain as it should be. The bill has a high-minded ideal. If 17-year-olds are going to be imprisoned, rehabilitation should be a goal. Currently, there is not enough of this going on in the adult system for these offenders, so it's not a matter of simply transferring funds from one system to another.

The bill envisions a 1% tax on video games and video gaming devices to provide these services.