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Nonviolent 17-year-olds need options

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Picture yourself as a 17-year-old — a junior in high school.

Now imagine you got a thrill out of shoplifting, or felt pressured by peers to do something that's wrong. Then you get caught.

How well would you fair in adult prison? Would you still have the life you have now if you did hard time?

That's the reality in Wisconsin right now. Because tough-on-crime lawmakers passed a bill 19 years ago, 17-year-olds who get arrested for nonviolent crimes — and it is important to emphasize we're talking about nonviolent crimes here — go into the traditional court system and are imprisoned alongside adult criminals.

There's a way to fix that.

Wisconsin shouldn't change its laws because 17-year-olds are too immature to be treated like other criminals, even though they are too immature. Wisconsin should change its laws because the outcome is sunnier for 17-year-old nonviolent offenders who have access to juvenile treatment and rehabilitation programs.

Outagamie County has a pilot program that allows 17-year-olds to receive treatment and participate in juvenile justice programs. The program has been considered a success because the vast majority are “doing well.”

We think that can be replicated across the state.

Get young people the help they need and keep them far away from hardened criminals. The crimes they're committing might be a cry for help instead of the first step toward a life of criminal activity.

It's our job to use successful programs to sort that out instead of slapping consequences on teens that could haunt them when they become productive adults.

We support the "Second Chance Bill" proposed by Sen. Jerry Petrowski, R-Stettin, Rep. Rob Hutton, R-Brookfield and Rep. Mary Czaja, R-Irma. It takes Wisconsin in the right direction.