

## Juvenile justice advocates say harsher penalties aren't the answer for repeat offenders

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After a series of violent crimes and car thefts in Hartford area municipalities, police say they are concerned that juvenile justice reforms have emboldened young repeat offenders, but criminal justice advocates say that harsher penalties are not the solution.

Chief of police James Cetran said juvenile crimes in Wethersfield are rising and attributed the increase to changes in Connecticut's juvenile justice laws.

Cetran said the closing of the Connecticut Juvenile Training School and the lack of serious consequences for juvenile offenders have encouraged some young people to steal cars, lead police officers on chases and more recently — attack and rob two middle school students waiting for their school buses. He called for tougher penalties for repeat juvenile offenders.

"We're put in a very hard position," Cetran said. "We can't hold a juvenile for more than six hours. It puts us between a rock and a hard place. We can't release them to the streets, we can't release them to the parents, because we often can't track them down or if we do they're unresponsive, and we can't take them to juvenile detention center."

Connecticut undersecretary for criminal justice policy and planning Mike Lawlor said there's no evidence that recent reforms, such as raising the age juvenile court jurisdiction from 16 to 18 and restricting pre-trial detention for juveniles, are causing such problems. He said that the state's most serious juvenile offenders are sentenced to jail time.

"There's no actual evidence to back that up," Lawlor said. "There is no evidence that there are kids who need to be locked up now and who aren't."

### More repeat offenders

Manchester police Sgt. Ryan Shea said his department has also seen more young people repeatedly committing crimes. An East Hartford police official said the same.

"A juvenile suspect in a robbery in the town of Manchester was arrested on unrelated charges, released and rearrested for a weapons violations. And this was all in the course of one weekend," Shea said. "To us, that is concerning." That same juvenile, Shea said, is a suspect in the assaults and robberies in Wethersfield.

"To us, repeat offenders raise the issue of whether the juvenile justice system and the penalties effectively thwart the crime," Shea said. "We agree that juvenile offenders committing crimes that put the public at risk such as vehicle thefts, engaging in pursuits and robberies, should call for heavier penalties."

In Westport, Police Chief Foti Koskinas expressed outrage over these continuing incidents of repeat offenders after police arrested one adult and four juveniles for stealing vehicles and led police on a pursuit.

"Unfortunately, the teens and young adults involved in these incidents never experience real consequences from the juvenile justice system," Koskinas said. "The teens involved in the pursuit last night had prior run-ins with law enforcement, which resulted in the orders to detain against them. Yet here they are, out and about in the middle of a weeknight knowing that all they will get is a slap on the wrist from the State of Connecticut. We are not doing Connecticut residents or these kids any favors by denying them consequences and real opportunities to reform. We need to work together to find a better solution before someone really gets hurt."

The sentiment among law enforcement in Connecticut, echoed a 2017 op-ed written by Chief State's Attorney Kevin Kane that asked the state to close "the gaps in our juvenile justice system that have emboldened young people to violate our

laws with no fear of repercussions.”

### **Harsher sentences no solution**

Juvenile justice advocates say that the real problem is that Connecticut passed laws to reform the juvenile system without committing the necessary funding to implement the solutions.

Wethersfield police chief warns that juvenile crime will only get worse if harsher penalties aren't enforced  
Abby Anderson, executive director of the Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance, said that intervention and community programs that could be instrumental in keeping kids out of the system have not been funded by the state.

“Put a kid in detention for two weeks and nothing is different except they are more angry,” Anderson said. “We have to address these things in more meaningful ways. I think one of our frustrations is that because of funding cuts, the middle of the system of the juvenile justice system has shrunk.”

Anderson said summer job programs and mentorship programs don't have funding, but could make a lot of difference in keeping kids from becoming repeat offenders.

“Our concern is the rhetoric that is out there is ‘kids have changed, we're too lenient and the only thing we can do with young people is put them in a cell and throw away the key.’ It's more complicated than that and it's dehumanizing,” Anderson said.

**Kathryn Scheinberg Meyer, a Wethersfield resident and attorney at the Center for Children's Advocacy, said the state needs to find solutions that effectively rehabilitate juvenile offenders and prevent them from re-entering the system instead of stigmatizing young offenders. Studies have shown that prison time does little to prevent juveniles from repeat offending or re-entering the system.**

“We want to make it better and safer for all residents and we don't need to do this at the expense of creating more myths and stereotypes,” Meyer said. “It's not that it's not fair to kids, its that it doesn't work.”

### **No Clear Link Between Juvenile Crime Spree, Legal Reforms**

**Leon Smith, one of Meyer's colleagues at the center, said the Caruthers Institute in Florida studied teen car thefts and came up with strategies to address the issue.**

**“They came up with a couple of innovative strategies and it's not about tougher penalties, it's about addressing the underlying behavior,” Smith said.** “A lot of kids who are out here and engaging in this behavior are dealing with some sort of underlying trauma. If you address that trauma you're much more likely to turn that kid around.”

One strategy, Smith said, would be to get the juvenile offender and the victim to sit down and have a conversation about what happened. Another would be to pair former juvenile offenders with younger individuals to create a mentor relationship, he said. Other examples of restorative approaches to juvenile justice, Smith said, would be address the underlying trauma in an offender's life that leads them to commit crimes.

“We keep hearing from law enforcement, ‘we don't know what to do.’ But those are example of what to do,” Smith said. “We should give these programs a chance and see if they really work. Locking them up over and over and over again doesn't necessarily work. So why not try a different approach?”