

Advocates Want to Keep Teens Out of Adult Prisons

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New York is the only state in the nation besides North Carolina that prosecutes 16 and 17 year olds in the adult criminal justice system.

The result? Over 45,000 16 and 17 year olds a year are arrested as adults. Many of them go into the adult prison system and advocates say their lives are then irreversibly changed by the experience — and not for the good.

Juvenile justice advocates think its time for New York to rethink its laws. Advocates, politicians, faith leaders, judges and the formerly incarcerated rallied outside the New York Metropolitan Corrections Center yesterday to kick off a campaign to change state law.

“We should be providing our youth the support and services they need to overcome challenges and be successful, not prosecuting and incarcerating them as adults,” said Donna Lieberman, executive director of the New York Civil Liberties Union, at the rally. “The time to end this cruel, wasteful and destructive practice is long overdue.”

Advocates say that statistics shows 70 percent of those under 18 who are arrested are black and Latino. That group makes up 80 percent of teens who are incarcerated.

Angelo Pinto, the campaign manager of the Juvenile Justice Project, said that a visit to the Greene Correctional Facility in upstate New York was eye-opening. The median age of those incarcerated there is 23.

“One of the things we saw with those 16 and 17 year olds, and even 18 and 19 year olds in the facility,” Pinto said, “is that they didn’t belong there. This facility is for an adult, the correction officers exploit the vulnerability of the youth and, sometimes, unfortunately, even other adult

inmates exploit the vulnerability of those youth.”

Advocates note that Gov. Andrew Cuomo has been extremely proactive on the issue of juvenile justice. Cuomo has shuttered a number of juvenile justice facilities and ordered up more alternative rehabilitation programs. They hope Cuomo and the Legislature will be open to changing the law and do it as quickly as possible.

However, efforts over the past two legislative sessions to pass laws to reduce penalties for possession of small amounts of marijuana — which would likely decrease the arrests of juveniles — have stalled amid fierce opposition.

–David Howard King contributed to this report.

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