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Editorial

Stemming dropouts will curb youth crime rate

The Detroit News

More Michigan teens are dropping out of school and the work force, says a new study of the condition of the state's children. That explains the report's other key finding: That young people are also more likely to be locked up here than in most other states. Michigan has to keep its children in school and out of jail.

Released today, the Kids Count in Michigan report makes a clear connection between the state's atrocious dropout rate and its teen incarceration rate. The number of "idle teens" -- those not attending school and not working -- grew to 46,000 in 2006 from 42,000 in 2005, according to the U.S. Census American Communities Survey.

With state unemployment rising, "Kids can't get jobs," says Jane Zehnder-Merrell, a senior research associate at Michigan League for Human Services, which collaborated on the report with Michigan's Children and the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

"It's worrying because kids who can't get jobs ... don't build soft skills such as dealing with customers. If teens can't get those skills, then they have a tougher time finding a job in the long run. We're seeing adults losing their jobs, and they're competing for the same jobs as teens are."

The best solution is to make sure teens graduate from high school and are prepared for college.

"We need to be looking for ways to increase access to education training programs for low-income young people who need skills to get into the job market," Zehnder-Merrell says.

United Way of Southeastern Michigan is among the organizations trying to address this need. The foundation this week unveiled a new funding strategy that will target its resources in a few key areas, including combatting the high school dropout problem.

And while it's is a difficult time for the United Way to cut off some of its traditional partner organizations in favor of a more focused funding approach, doing so increases its likelihood

of making an impact on the region's chronic problems, including the dropout rate. Michigan's policy makers should take note of the United Way's decision to focus on education as preventative to other social ills.

No problem is more urgent than rescuing teenagers. While Michigan mirrors the rest of country in the rate of minority youth in custody, the rate for white teenagers is *triple* the national average, according to the Kids Count report, suggesting that this is far more than an urban problem.

The rate of all children aged 10 to 15 in custody is 137 per 100,000, compared with a national average of 125.

Keeping those kids locked away costs \$200 to \$300 per youth per day. It's a poor investment: 50 percent to 80 percent of youth released from juvenile correctional facilities are rearrested within two to three years.

Dropouts are more likely to become juvenile offenders, and juvenile criminals are more likely to become adult criminals.

If it doesn't get a handle on its dropout crisis, Michigan's hopes for cutting future prison spending are dim. The best way to keep children out of jail is to keep them in school.

As the state debates its education priorities, a premium should be placed on programs aimed at reducing dropouts.

A strategy that employs family and community-based intervention programs will be far more effective than one that relies so heavily on the criminal justice system.

Locking a child away is a short-term solution. Ultimately, that child will be back in the community, still unprepared to function in a civil society.

An urgent effort is needed that employs both public and private resources to educate children so we don't have to incarcerate them.

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