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Guest Commentary

# Opinion | It's time to reform Michigan's juvenile justice system

October 2, 2023

[John Damoose](#) & [Roger Victory](#)

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The Michigan legislature has an unprecedented opportunity to help protect public safety and improve outcomes for youth across our state. The House and Senate will soon be voting on HB [4624-4643](#) and SB [418-437](#), the Justice for Kids and Communities bill package, which is a comprehensive, long overdue effort to bring Michigan juvenile justice policy in line with national research and best practice.



Sen. John Damoose, R-Harbor Springs, represents Michigan's 37th Senate District. Sen. Roger Victory, R- Hudsonville, represents Michigan's 31st Senate District.

This bill package stems from the work of the bipartisan Task Force on Juvenile Justice Reform that oversaw a comprehensive, data-driven assessment of Michigan's juvenile justice system. The taskforce found large inconsistencies across the state in the use of research-based policies and practices that we know work to reduce recidivism. For example, nearly half of all referrals to juvenile court and over 60 percent of youth in secure detention have committed a status or misdemeanor offense as their most serious offense. Research tells us that using the juvenile justice system, especially secure facilities, for youth who are lower risk is more likely to increase recidivism rates while limited resources are not used to focus on youth who commit more serious offenses and need intensive supervision and services.

The Justice for Kids and Communities bill package establishes a foundation of juvenile justice best practices that all localities across the state must adhere to, while continuing to provide for local flexibility and discretion. Key system improvements include requiring courts to use validated risk, need, and detention screening and assessment tools to make data-driven decisions, and increasing funding through the Child Care Fund for evidence-based community-based services.

Right now, whereas one jurisdiction might have a robust set of services available to young people, another might have detention or incarceration as their only option. By supporting all counties to match the right youth to the right level of supervision and most effective services, we can shift from our current system that is often "justice by geography" and towards a more effective, equitable system across the state. To ensure youth, our local courts, and state agencies are held accountable, the bill package also requires statewide investments in quality assurance and data collection so we can

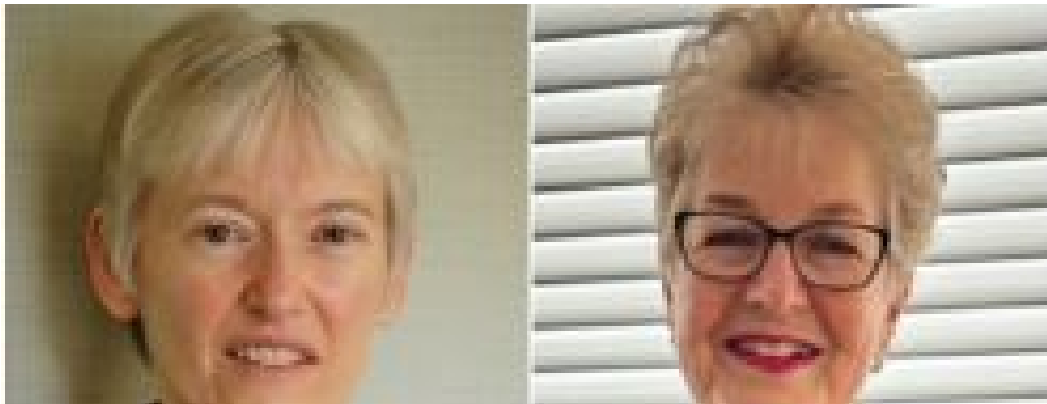
evaluate system performance and youth outcomes, and ensure resources are consistently invested in what actually works. These types of changes in other states have led to significant reductions in incarceration while improving outcomes and producing long-term cost savings.

The focus of the juvenile justice system in Michigan should be on public safety, rehabilitation, providing youth with second chances, and supporting young people to transition into successful adults. The Justice for Kids and Communities bill package promotes all these goals and does so in ways that are data-driven, research-based, and proven effective. We encourage our legislative colleagues in both parties and other stakeholders statewide to support this important step forward for Michigan's children, families, and communities.

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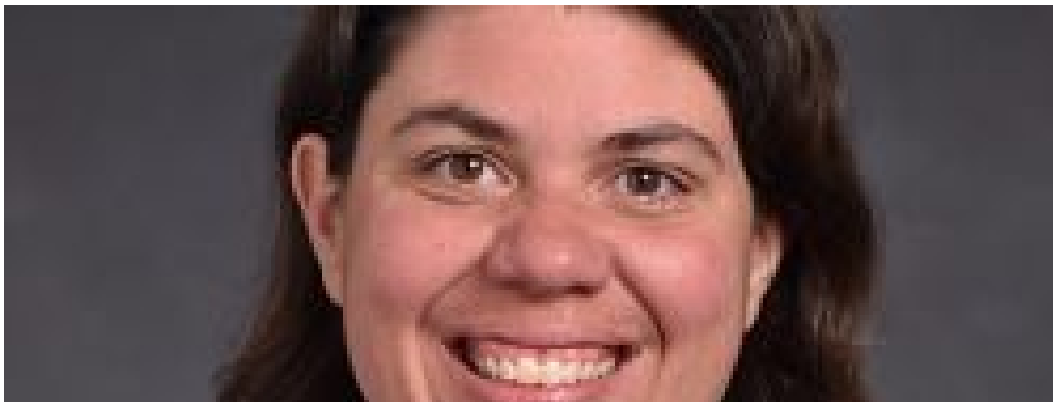
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