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EDITORIAL

Back Where They Belong

Gov. M. Jodi Rell vaulted Connecticut to the forefront of the juvenile justice reform movement when she signed a bill that removes 16- and 17-year-old offenders from the adult courts and puts them back into the juvenile justice system where they clearly belong. This new law comes in response to studies showing that children who do time in adult jails are more likely to become hardened criminals — and to commit more violent crime — than youthful offenders who are handled by the juvenile system.

The rush to try children as adults began in the early 1990s, after high-profile crimes like the Central Park jogger case, in which a young woman was badly beaten and raped in New York's Central Park. Extreme violence and sexual assault clearly merit severe punishment. But today, in too many states, young people are routinely tried as adults, even those who commit nonviolent offenses.

In adult jails, these youthful offenders have little protection from being battered or sexually assaulted. Even those who leave jail determined not to go back, find that a conviction in adult courts closes off their chances for finding decent jobs.

After Connecticut's law takes effect, New York and North Carolina will be the only two remaining states that automatically transfer 16-year-olds who commit crimes to adult courts. Unfortunately, nearly every state has laws that encourage prosecutors to try children as adults. The country needs to abandon these failed, destructive policies.