

Summary of Testimony of Robert G. Schwartz
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House Crime Prevention and Youth Development Caucus
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There is powerful public recognition of the science showing that teens are different: adolescent development is a unique time of experimentation and risk taking. There is large agreement that youth need room to make and learn from their mistakes; that the justice system should not be used for minor misbehavior that is typical for teens; and that public safety can be maintained while giving youth opportunities to discover the people they will become.

Despite this emerging, bipartisan consensus, state juvenile justice systems are riddled with vestiges of a punitive past. Too many youth are still labeled “delinquent” for typical adolescent misbehavior. Too many youth are unnecessarily confined. Too many suffer life-long consequences because of their involvement with the juvenile justice system.

Congressional action is essential to accelerate the pace of reform that promotes prevention and recognizes adolescent differences while promoting public safety. These are very compatible goals.

The juvenile justice system should be a last resort. When it must be used, it should avoid interventions that unnecessarily disrupt normal adolescent development. It should maintain or build connections with caring adults. It should divert youth from the system entirely: the best way to do so is to avoid criminalizing minor, typically adolescent misbehavior. It should make less frequent use of institutional care—through diversion from placement and enhanced reentry policies that reduce length of stay and recidivism. A thoughtful system involves having fewer life consequences for youth who are involved with the justice system.