

**Statement of Senator Patrick Leahy,  
Chairman, Senate Judiciary Committee,  
On “Ending the School-to-Prison Pipeline”  
December 12, 2012**

Today the Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Human Rights considers the important issue of whether we are creating a school-to-prison pipeline. This is a timely hearing on an issue of pressing national importance.

I am concerned that too many young people are being funneled into the criminal justice system, where their problems only multiply. I have long supported a strong commitment to prevent youth violence. As a former prosecutor, I know the importance of holding criminals accountable for their crimes. But when we are talking about young people, we must also think about how best to teach them to become responsible, contributing members of society as adults and to rehabilitate them away from lives of crime. Doing so will help us keep our communities safer.

I am disturbed that young people from minority communities continue to be overrepresented in the juvenile justice and our criminal justice systems. I have been fighting for decades because of my concern that too many runaway and homeless youth are still locked up for status offenses without having committed any crime.

I have consistently fought for new and effective juvenile justice legislation. I introduced the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Reauthorization Act and intend to reintroduce it in the next Congress. The bill aims to refocus attention on prevention programs intended to keep children from ever entering the criminal justice system. It seeks to encourage states to move away from keeping children in adult prisons. It makes use of community-based services to address the needs of at-risk youth, particularly those with mental health and drug treatment needs.

I also sponsored the Reconnecting Homeless Youth Act, which reauthorized a critical Federal grant program established to help states and local communities address the needs of runaway and homeless youth in both urban and rural areas so they can establish stable, positive lives. This bipartisan bill was signed into law by President Bush in October 2008. I also worked hard to pass the Second Chance Act, which, among many other positive programs, authorized grants and support for programs that help young people who have gotten enmeshed in the juvenile justice system to learn the skills and receive the services they need to return to their education and become contributing members of society, rather than continuing down a path toward the criminal justice system.

More recently, in August of this year, I chaired a hearing examining rising prison costs. The hearing highlighted the fact that more and more people are being incarcerated for longer and longer, which has resulted in increased costs and has placed an enormous strain on Federal, state, and local budgets. We should be doing everything we can to keep people, particularly our children, out of the criminal justice system, not finding ways to funnel them into it.

The goals that my legislation has sought to achieve in the juvenile justice system are the same as those motivating efforts to reform our school discipline system: keeping our communities safe by reducing juvenile crime, advancing programs and policies that keep children out of the criminal justice system, and encouraging states to implement policies designed to steer those children who do enter the juvenile justice system back on track to become contributing members of society.

We owe it to our young people, our families and our communities to end the school-to-prison pipeline and to reform the juvenile justice system. I hope we can join together in the next Congress to do so.

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