

Editorial

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By Staff

Teen criminals' privacy vs. your right to know

Your state representatives don't think you need to know if your neighborhood teen has been molesting other kids. If you have a burglar in your midst and he/she is under 18, then you don't need to know that either, even if it's someone your son or daughter is dating.

In 1977, the Legislature moved the juvenile justice system into the superior and district courts, in the interest of access to justice, as called for in the state constitution. Now, it wants to limit access to juvenile criminal records and court records in general, ostensibly because the Internet has created unintended uses for those records.

Last week, Substitute House Bill 1651 passed the House, 97-0. Was no one paying attention to its ramifications?

While the names of minors are currently public, this newspaper has chosen to only publish juveniles' names if they are charged with a felony. It doesn't happen often. The Press has named a youth charged with arson, and last year named the teen boy who made threats that led to the closing of Skyline High School.

Should their privacy have been protected over your right to know?

We believe legislators should be defending the principle of open and honest courts and law enforcement with full accountability to the people. HB 1651 agrees that juvenile court proceedings should be open, but the proceedings should not be disseminated. In other words, you can go to the court hearing, but you can't tell anyone about it.

The bill explains the repeal based on the "scientifically documented differences between the brain development of juveniles and adults," yet goes on to allow open court records for juveniles adjudicated of a sex offense. Why the difference, if the goal for both is rehabilitation and protecting their future?

Another option would be to lower the legal age for juveniles. Perhaps all youths over age 14 charged with felonies should be charged as adults — now, there's a deterrent! What 14-year-old doesn't know the difference between right and wrong?

The bill now goes to the Senate. Call your senators to let them know that SB 1651 is not in the public's interest: 5th District, Mark Mullet, 360-786-7608; or 41st District, Steve Litzow, 360-786-7641.