



REAL-TIME NEWS FROM BIRMINGHAM

Task force to tackle juvenile justice reforms in Alabama

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A 22-member task force representing the governor's office, Legislature, courts, law enforcement, mental health, education and other services is launching a study of how Alabama can reduce juvenile crime.

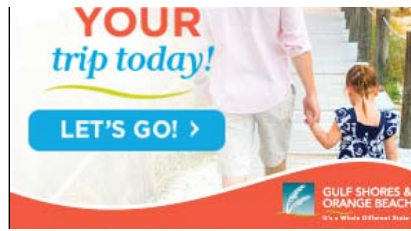
The Alabama Juvenile Justice Task Force met for the first time today. It will work with the Pew Charitable Trusts to develop recommendations that members say will be based on evidence and data.

The approach has parallels to efforts to fix Alabama's prisons, including sentencing guidelines that took effect in 2013 and criminal justice reforms that passed in 2015. Alabama's prisons remain overcrowded and understaffed. But the inmate population is declining.

Sen. Cam Ward, R-Alabaster, who has helped lead prison reform efforts and is a member of the new task force, said a comprehensive state-led approach to juvenile justice is needed, in part, because counties vary greatly in their ability to support the needed programs.

Community-based interventions can be more effective in stopping teens from repeat offenses than confinement in state institutions, Noah Bein of the Pew Charitable Trusts told the task force during a presentation today. Bein showed some positive results from reform efforts in other states, including Georgia and Kentucky.





Montgomery County District Attorney Daryl Bailey, a task force member, said the violent nature of crimes committed by young teens is alarming.

"We're on the cusp of losing a whole generation of kids," Bailey said. "The kids that I see coming into the criminal justice system now are becoming younger and younger, the ones that are committing these violent crimes. I'm seeing 14, 15, sometimes 13-year-olds committing the robberies, murders, these type of violent crimes that used to be reserved for the older adults."

Bailey said there are multiple factors, including mental health issues, drug abuse and social media bullying. A common thread for many youthful offenders, Bailey said, is a fundamental lack of parental guidance.

Ward said there won't be simple answers. He said a proactive effort can divert young offenders from landing in the adult system.

"There is not one silver bullet answer," Ward said.

The goal of the task force is to reach a consensus on policy recommendations and issue a report in November.

Roundtable discussions are planned for this summer with families, probation officer, judges, crime victim advocates, faith leaders, prosecutors, educators and others.

Alabama and national politics.

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