

# HOUSTON CHRONICLE

## Bad behavior: Young criminals aren't safe in lockup

### Editorial

Aug. 10, 2007, 9:21PM

Texans have shown little patience with young people who commit heinous crimes. This state's populace has been willing to try young teens as adults for murder, to mingle juvenile offenders with hardened adult convicts and to execute capital murderers who killed before reaching adulthood. Even so, the unceasing reports of mismanagement and abuse emanating from the Texas Youth Commission should disgust even the staunchest tough-on-crime residents.

This state has no shortage of young people who kill, rape, rob and assault. That's why the Legislature passed increasingly punishing laws to crack down on violent youth behavior. But the lockup facilities maintained by TYC for Texas' worst young criminals were never meant to be the uncivilized nightmare that a stream of shocking reports suggest they have become.

To its credit, the Legislature passed reforming measures after the public learned that young inmates were being sexually abused and beaten. And that some correctional officers had criminal records. And that some offenders' sentences were extended on the whims of corrupt guards, sometimes for not performing sexual favors.

Now a recent Chronicle review has shown that many juveniles adjudicated for robbery, sexual assault and even murder routinely are released after serving only a fraction of their sentence, even when judges handed down lengthy terms for severe crimes. All a young violent offender has to do to earn a speedy exit, no matter how horrible his crime, is to behave well behind bars.

The TYC maintains that all youths paroled early meet agency guidelines. It's time to review those standards. The severity of a young person's crimes also should be considered. TYC should track whether paroled juveniles commit new crimes. That will influence what factors should be weighed before early releases are approved.

In March, the Harris County juvenile board assigned a probation officer, Susan Moynahan, to monitor local offenders sent to TYC facilities. She found problems with sex offender programs for adjudicated youth. Many local offenders aren't given prescribed anti-hyperactivity drugs or mental illness treatment. Commissioners Court should make Moynahan's post a permanent one when it meets in the fall to evaluate whether local oversight is needed. It clearly is.

TYC has a difficult role to play. The agency is supposed to maintain safe custody of the state's worst young offenders — many as dangerous as any hardened adult criminal — but it is also supposed to operate under the philosophy that even terribly troubled children are redeemable. Right now, the commission doesn't seem to be doing either job well.

<http://www.chron.com/disp/story.mpl/editorial/5045585.html>