

## D.C. Juvenile Justice Reforms Debated

By Clarence Williams, Washington Post Staff Writer  
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Witnesses at a hearing on the District's juvenile justice system agreed last night that it needs rehabilitation but disagreed on what changes are called for.

Teenage car thieves and delinquent youths fleeing group homes prompted much of the concern from residents at the D.C. Council hearing.

Several reform proposals are before the council, but three council members and about 100 people in a drafty auditorium at Savoy Elementary school in Southeast Washington heard testimony supporting and denouncing two bills in particular. One piece of legislation would open delinquency proceedings to the general public for the first time. The other pushes for more rehabilitation efforts for juvenile offenders, rather than incarceration focused on punishment.

"Sunshine is the most powerful disinfectant," said D.C. lawyer Kathryn Shepherd, arguing for greater access to juvenile proceedings for the public, including crime victims.

Shepherd, who said she spent 20 years working in juvenile justice in San Francisco, said that in states that have opened youth legal proceedings to the public, courts are not flooded with spectators and the juvenile judicial system has not been paralyzed.

"You have nothing to lose by opening the court doors," Shepherd said.

But D.C. Superior Court Chief Judge Rufus G. King III testified that children are entering the legal system at younger ages each year and that opening the courts' doors could open the way for "neighborhood gossip" and reduce the likelihood of rehabilitation.

Eugene N. Hamilton, a Superior Court senior judge who was testifying as chairman of Mayor Anthony A. Williams's panel on youth safety and juvenile justice reform, said juvenile court proceedings should remain closed. "This part of the system is not broken, and you do not need to fix it," he said.

Council member Kathy Patterson (D-Ward 3), chair of the judiciary committee, is chief sponsor of the bill to allow greater public access to juvenile court hearings unless a judge deems that it could cause undue harm to the child. Open proceedings would increase accountability for judges, attorneys and social workers, proponents have argued.

A lawyer for The Washington Post, Eric Lieberman, testified last night on behalf of a regional media association and lobbied to increase public access.