

Allow young offenders a clean slate

By The Editorial Board

CRIMINAL RECORDS follow offenders for life. The indelible trail can be particularly unfair and damaging for juveniles. For many, it creates a powerful obstacle to becoming productive members of society. The stigma of a criminal record — even for a nonviolent offense — can fester long into adulthood, limiting someone’s ability to get a job, attend college, secure a loan, or receive public benefits.

Massachusetts can take a meaningful step toward keeping juveniles from reoffending as adults by creating a system to expunge their criminal records under certain circumstances.

The state’s records law allows for individuals to have juvenile offenses sealed, but not expunged. Sealing a record only secures it in a separate file. The fact that the juvenile committed a crime is still accessible, but details of the offense are not. Rather than protecting a young offender, however, the lack of information encourages speculation about the seriousness of the offense, and often may lead someone to think the worst. That’s usually not true. [The Juvenile Law Center](#) has found that 95 percent of youth in juvenile justice systems nationwide committed nonviolent offenses.

A couple of bills filed during the current Massachusetts legislative session propose the permanent deletion of some juvenile criminal records. [Teens Leading the Way](#), a coalition of young people from Lynn, Worcester, Boston, and other cities, has started a campaign in support of a bill filed by [Senator Karen Spilka](#) and [Representative Kay Khan](#). The legislation calls for automatically expunging misdemeanor records — in both electronic and physical forms — for offenders up to age 21, after they complete their sentences. For felonies, expungement would be decided by a judge.

“We just want to make sure there are no barriers or trip wires for youth after they’ve done their time,” said Susan Le, 20, who is involved with [Teens Leading the Way](#). Le and others believe that allowing some juveniles a fresh start might keep them from becoming career criminals. “Roughly 74 percent of people who are involved with the Department of Youth Services in Massachusetts end up in an adult correctional facility within six years,” she said.

Of note, the financial benefits of reducing recidivism would be significant for taxpayers. [A 2013 MassINC report](#) found that decreasing the number of reoffenders by 5 percent would save the state about \$150 million annually.

From almost every perspective, expunging nonviolent-offense records for juveniles makes sense. State legislators should act to make it happen.