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16-Year-Old Girl Faces 40 Years in Texas Prison for Drug Offense

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News Summary

The county attorney in El Paso, Texas, is seeking a harsh prison term for a 16-year-old girl caught smuggling cocaine into the U.S. from Mexico, the [El Paso Times](#) reported Sept. 24.

County Attorney Jose Rodriguez asked for and received grand-jury clearance for the girl, whose name was withheld, to be prosecuted under Texas' Determinate Sentencing Statute, which allows minors to be punished beyond their 21st birthday and would expose the girl to up to 40 years in juvenile detention and Texas prisons. The girl was caught allegedly trying to smuggle about 50 pounds of cocaine into the U.S.

"Proceeding under the determinate sentencing statute in this case demonstrates that we will not tolerate these types of crimes, and should serve as a warning to those teens who might be tempted by the money being offered by the drug cartels," Rodriguez said.

But a coalition of local educators, healthcare leaders and attorneys is working to undo Rodriguez's decision. "Our correctional system is so imperfect," said child psychiatrist Cristina Cruz-Grost. "We need to come together to educate and rehabilitate people who go through the system. To place a 16-year-old in the correctional department of Texas with up to a 40-year sentence erases the potential for rehabilitation and destroys her life."

Elhiu Dominguez, a spokesperson for the county attorney, said Rodriguez would not necessarily seek a 40-year sentence. "We simply wanted to give jurors an option for a wider sentence," Dominguez said. "Our emphasis is not on incarcerating juveniles but on rehabilitating them."

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