



## Raise the Age Call to Action

Governor Evers and the Wisconsin State Legislature must pass raise the age legislation in the next session and allocate sufficient funding to counties for juvenile rehabilitation services. Despite having broad, bipartisan support, Wisconsin is one of only three states nationwide that still automatically tries 17-year-olds as adults. States across the country are raising the age because it is a cost-effective, proven public safety measure that reduces racial disparities and ensures our young people have the resources they need to address underlying trauma and avoid future entanglement with the criminal justice system.

**An Act of Faith.** Our Christian faith calls us to care for the well-being, safety, and health of all of God's children. Recognizing that we are all both sinners and saints, we demand that mercy, justice, compassion, and restoration should be the pillars of our criminal justice system. Raising the age and properly funding rehabilitative and community-based care will bring us closer to recognizing and caring for the unique needs of our young people.

**Fiscally Responsible while Improving Public Safety.** Raising the age reduces recidivism, protects both youth involved in the justice system and their surrounding communities, and is fiscally responsible policy. The CDC found that youth tried in juvenile courts have a 34% lower recidivism rate than those tried in adult courts, even when controlled for offenses charged. This number represents college diplomas, steady employment, and safe housing; it also represents a growing tax base. Trying youth as adults, meanwhile, has been proven to lead to an escalation of future criminality, especially among those charged with violent crimes. Simply put, raising the age of juvenile jurisdiction to age 18 and funding DCF and counties to implement effective rehabilitation measures for 17-year-olds in the juvenile system lowers long-term corrections spending while keeping our communities safer.

**Reducing Racial Disparities.** Wisconsin has the second highest black-white incarceration disparity in the country. While this disparity needs to be addressed at all levels of the system, reforming how we treat the youngest people in our criminal justice system can have compounding effects in reducing racial disparities across the board. Raising the age of juvenile jurisdiction to age 18 and funding effective rehabilitation and diversion programs reduces racial disparities within the criminal justice system and ensures that the lives of our youth aren't destroyed by a mistake made in their adolescence.

**Addressing Mental Health Challenges and Childhood Trauma.** Our society has long recognized that children and youth are different from fully developed adults. Today, neurological research clearly demonstrates that our brains are not fully developed until a person's mid-twenties. However, Wisconsin still treats 17-year-olds as adults and ignores the unique challenges and needs they face. For example, 72% of incarcerated youth struggle with a mental health challenge, and 97% of incarcerated youth have experienced childhood trauma. This means young people, even more so than adults in the justice system, need treatment instead of punishment. The juvenile system allows for individual assessments, access to mental health services, and ensures that youth can continue to receive a quality education. It also opens doors for in-home and community-based rehabilitation that keeps them with their families and in their communities. The options available in the juvenile system reduces their chance of reoffending and allows them to overcome past trauma. Funding juvenile rehabilitation programs and raising the age responds to brain science and ensures underlying trauma and mental health challenges are properly addressed.

**Safety of Children.** In addition to limiting rehabilitation options, treating youth in the adult system has disastrous consequences that often compounds trauma and encourages recidivism. Youth and young adults are also the most likely of any group to get sexually assaulted or raped in prison. This may help explain why youth incarcerated in adult facilities are 36 times more likely to commit suicide compared to those in juvenile detention facilities. Finally, youth incarcerated with adults are more likely to commit future crimes, especially violent crimes, compared to those in juvenile detention. All told, youth are better served in their own facilities and experience better outcomes when tried in the juvenile system.