

Raise the Age (RTA) Is Right for Wisconsin

Supported by Voters

- Forty-seven states process 17 year olds in their juvenile justice systems.¹
- Deep red states such as Louisiana and South Carolina, blue states such as New York and Massachusetts, and purple states such as Michigan and North Carolina have all passed RTA legislation in the past 10 years.
- 2021 Badger Institute poll found that 86% of Wisconsin voters agree that “the main goal of our criminal justice system should be rehabilitating people to become productive, law-abiding citizens.”² The juvenile system accomplishes this far better than the adult system.
- A 2016 national poll found that over 85% of Americans support providing financial incentives for states and municipalities to invest in alternatives to youth incarceration, such as intensive rehabilitation, education, job training, community services, and programs that provide youth the opportunity to repair harm to victims and communities.³

Increases Public Safety

- Juveniles are more likely to move beyond delinquency and become responsible adults if they are helped by an effective youth justice system.⁴
- The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (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.⁵
- The CDC also found that youth transferred to the adult system were 39% more likely to be re-arrested for a violent offense in the future than those who stayed in the juvenile system.⁶
- A comparison of two states shows a 44% reduction in felony property crimes when youth are tried in the juvenile system rather than the adult system.⁷
- Sending youth to the adult system has a negligible impact on deterring criminality, as most youth are unaware that they can be tried as adults.⁸
- In 2019, a raise the age policy could have increased public safety and helped 17 year olds in 70 of Wisconsin’s 72 counties.⁹

Results in Fiscal Savings

- Each youth in the adult system costs the state almost \$40,000 per year to incarcerate.¹⁰
- The Urban Institute in Connecticut found that for “every \$1 spent on raising the age, the state could expect to gain \$3 in reduced crime, incarceration costs, and public benefits.”¹¹
- Rehabilitated youth are more likely to obtain steady employment and earn higher wages. A Missouri State University study found that every young person moved to the juvenile system will add almost \$170,000 on average to the state’s tax base as a result of higher lifetime wages.¹²
- Wisconsin’s workforce is shrinking and getting older. RTA will increase the number of youth who enter the workforce and lower the number of incarcerated adults.¹³ More workers and fewer inmates will boost Wisconsin’s economy.

Reduces Racial Disparities

- Wisconsin has the second highest black-white incarceration disparity in the U.S and reforming how we treat youth in our justice system can have compounding effects in reducing racial disparities across the board.^{[14](#)}
- A 2016 study found that the automatic transfer of young people into the adult system disproportionately affects youth of color. And once they are in the adult system, black and Native American youth are more likely to face conviction in adult court, especially for drug-related crimes.^{[15](#)}

Protects Youth

- Young people in the adult prison system are more likely to be sexually and physically abused than any other population.^{[16](#)}
- The MacIver Institute reports that, despite comprising less than 1% of the adult prison population, juveniles represent over 20% of its sexual abuse victims.^{[17](#)}
- Juveniles in the adult system are up to 36 times more likely to commit suicide compared to their adult counterparts.^{[18](#)}
- Wisconsin must do everything to protect the young people in its care by keeping them separate from adult inmates.

Promotes Mental Health

- The Wisconsin Office of Children's Mental Health reports that, as of January 2020, over 72% of incarcerated youth struggled with a mental health challenge.^{[19](#)}
- A national study found that 97% of incarcerated youth had experienced childhood trauma.^{[20](#)}
- The services available in the juvenile system address underlying trauma and mental health challenges. The adult system simply does not adequately provide these services.

Relies on Medical Science

- Research in adolescent brain science, developmental psychology, and sociology demonstrates that adolescents are highly influenced by peers, are impulsive, and frequently fail to consider future consequences. As such, they require age-appropriate interventions.^{[21](#)}
- Research indicates that nearly all youth will mature and age out of crime, especially with the right opportunities.^{[22](#)}

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