



# Advocacy Toolkit

Raise the Age -Wisconsin

Compiled by the Raise the Age Coalition  
2021

# Advocacy Guide

## Raise the Age - Wisconsin



### Welcome to Our Advocacy Guide!

Thank you for advocating for Raise the Age Legislation and connecting with your elected representatives! This Advocacy Guide provides a step-by-step guide of how to contact your legislators and conduct an effective advocacy meeting to discuss Raise the Age legislation. Reach out to the RTA Coalition if you have any lingering questions!

### Why Should I Meet With My Legislators?

Your State Assemblyperson and State Senator are your elected representatives in the State Legislature, who are responsible for crafting and passing legislation that affects all Wisconsinites. State Legislators hold the keys to passing Raise the Age legislation here in Wisconsin. So why meet with them?

State legislators are tasked with creating policy and passing legislation that represents the views and interests of their constituents. Therefore, legislators appreciate input and conversations with people in their districts as they can get a better understanding of what is important to those they represent. In fact, many elected officials tally the calls and written messages they receive from their constituents as well as their meetings with them.

Whether you believe they already agree with you or are convinced they will not, us as advocates don't want them to be able to claim that they haven't heard from their constituents. The more people that lift their voices, sometimes over a long period, the more likely our legislators will listen and understand our perspectives to serve the people in their districts and get re-elected. Speaking with legislators helps them do their job better and allows our priorities to remain front in center as they draft policy and legislation.

### How Do I Contact My Legislators?

The first step in contacting your legislator is to know who your legislator is. The easiest way to do this is the tool found on the Legislature's home page: [legis.wisconsin.gov](http://legis.wisconsin.gov). Go to the center right of the page to fill in your address under "Who Are My Legislators?"

If you do not have computer access, you can call your local town, village, or city clerk's office to find out who represents you. Your local library may be able to help you with this also.

## Scheduling a Lobby Visit

Once you find your state legislators, reach out to schedule a virtual or in-person lobby visit. Using the [legis.wisconsin.gov](http://legis.wisconsin.gov) webpage, find the phone numbers of your two elected representatives. Call each office to schedule an appointment.

### Remember these five things when you call:

- Identify yourself as a constituent. Constituents who vote for the representative have more influence than those whom the legislator does not represent. Identify yourself as a constituent and you will have their attention!
- Identify what issue or priority you are wanting to meet to discuss. In our case, state your support for raising the age of juvenile jurisdiction, and ask for an appointment to speak with your representative about the importance of raising the age.
- Ask what times work best for them, and try to work around their schedule. Legislators often have busy schedules, especially during a budget season. Legislators and their staff appreciate flexibility in setting a date and time.
- Ask how the elected official would prefer to meet. While our state still wrestles with the Covid-19 pandemic, we want all parties to feel safe and comfortable during the visit. If you feel comfortable meeting in person, then ask if their office would prefer to have the meeting in person or over Zoom. If you would prefer to meet virtually, ask what time they would be available for a Zoom meeting and offer to set up an invite.
- Speaking with a legislative aide or other staff member is ok! While many would rather meet with their elected official directly, remember that legislators often lean heavily on the policy guidance of legislative aides. Meeting with staff members can gain you a valuable and influential advocate with your elected representative.

Once an appointment is set, thank them for their time and the opportunity to speak with them about this issue.

### Virtual Advocacy Meetings

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the Raise the Age Coalition would encourage all advocates to consider setting up a meeting via Zoom. The same principles apply as in-person visits!

### Tips on Zoom Meetings from the Wisconsin Catholic Conference:

- Make sure to check and confirm when and where your meeting will occur.
- Make certain your video and audio equipment work before the meeting and arrive early, if necessary, to test it.
- Also have any meeting access information on-hand, like a web link, as well as other ways to access the meeting if needed, such as a phone number, password, or other information.
- Include one “point-of-contact” phone number in case someone can’t access the meeting.
- Try to choose a meeting space that is free of items that may cause distractions or loud noises that could interrupt the meeting. Turn ringers and notifications off on your computer and mobile phone.

## Preparing for Your Legislative Visit

Prepare for the meeting by deciding the following:

- What information and messages do you want to convey?
- What do you want the legislator to do? What is your “ask?”
- Who will be speaking and in what order (when meeting with fellow advocates)? What will each person’s points be? Who will make the ask? Try to meet ahead of time to plan.

Make sure to be on time for your appointment. Be prepared, dress neatly, be polite and be brief.

Also prepare a leave-behind item that summarizes RTA and why it should be a priority for your elected officials. Download or print available resources from [raisetheagewi.org/advocacy](http://raisetheagewi.org/advocacy).

### Suggested Template for Your Legislative Visit

While effective legislative visits can take any number of forms, here is our suggested template for how to outline your legislative visit:

- At the beginning of the meeting, have everyone introduce themselves, state who they represent, and briefly state why RTA is important to you. Be sure to mention that you are a constituent from their district.
- After introductions, you and your other advocates should start discussing 3-4 key talking points about what RTA is important to you and why your Legislator should also prioritize RTA. To help guide your talking points, see our RTA Talking Points document.
- If able, we suggest connecting these talking points directly to your Legislator personally, whether it is tying it to their district, personal experience, or to policy interests that are already important to them.
- After discussing your policy talking points, make an Ask. This is a specific action that you would like your Legislator to make. For Raise the Age, we suggest the following:
  - If your Legislator is on the Joint Finance Committee, ask that they include the Raise the Age provision and allocation in this year’s biennial budget.
  - If your Legislator is not on the Joint Finance Committee, ask that they support Raise the Age policy as a budget provision or as separate legislation. If they are in support of RTA, you could also ask if they would take leadership on drafting and pass a RTA bill during this year’s session.
- After your ask, give time for the legislator to respond or ask questions.
- Once you have responded to questions or comments, thank them so much for their time and leave the meeting. If meeting in-person leave behind your RTA materials.

## After Your Visit

The days following your legislative visit serve as valuable times to follow up and keep your issues on your legislator's radar.

- First and foremost, follow up your meeting with a note thanking them for the meeting, restating your concerns, and providing further information (if necessary). Be sure to thank them for their time and reiterate their appreciation for talking with them about Raise the Age legislation. This thank you note can be sent over email or snail mail. Find the physical address or email address of your legislator at <https://legis.wisconsin.gov/>.
- Also be sure to send any further information or answer any questions that you didn't have an answer for during the meeting. Any "Action Items" that were given to you after the meeting, follow up well within a week or meeting. If you meet virtually, email them your leave behind items to remind them of your priorities.

## Where Else Can I Learn More?

In addition to this guide, our coalition members have some additional resources that provide excellent insight and information on how to maximize your lobby visits and give additional guidance on what to expect. Here is a short list of helpful guides:

- **ACLU** - ["How to Engage Elected Officials."](#)
- **ELCA Advocacy** - ["Virtual Visits"](#)
- **Wisconsin Association of Family & Children's Agencies** - ["Helpful Hints for Advocating with State Legislators"](#)

## Connecting as a Person of Faith

RTA - Wisconsin is built on a strong partnership between secular and interfaith organizations, and we want to inform faith leaders on the unique gifts they can bring to direct advocacy.

As a person or faith or faith leader, consider the following:

- Include what particular faith values have driven you to support RTA. What part of your faith informs your position on this policy?
- Discuss how your congregation or faith community lives out these values. If you are a faith leader, discuss how you lead your faith community to live out the values that guide your passion for RTA.
- If you share a faith background with the Legislator, be sure to talk about shared faith values and how they can inform us on RTA policy.
- If you are a faith leader, be sure to mention your leadership role and your home faith community. Faith leaders are trusted pillars in most communities, and identifying yourself as one only makes what you have to say more important.

## **Inclusion in the Wisconsin Biennial Budget**

Dear **[Decision Maker]**,

Please prioritize Raise the Age in this year's Wisconsin State Budget.

As your constituent, I am asking that you include provisions and appropriate funding in the Wisconsin State Budget to raise the age of juvenile jurisdiction to include 17-year-olds. Currently, we are one of three states that still automatically treats 17-year-olds as adults, which leads to higher recidivism rates, higher government spending, higher racial disparities, and worse outcomes for our state's young people.

**[Insert why raising the age is important to you. For more information and talking points, visit <https://raisetheagewi.org/why-raise-the-age>.]**

For these reasons, please support and prioritize Raise the Age provisions in this year's Wisconsin State Budget.

This year, you have an opportunity to extend juvenile jurisdiction through the budget process. Thank you for considering the prioritization of Raise the Age provisions in this year's biennial budget, which would make Wisconsin a more just and equitable place to live.

Thank you,

**[Your Name]**

**[Your Email Address]**

**[Your Phone Number - Optional]**

## **Prioritizing Raise the Age in this Year's Legislative Session**

Dear **[Decision Maker]**,

As your constituent, I am asking that you please prioritize raising the age of juvenile jurisdiction in this year's legislative session to bring 17-year-olds back to their rightful place in the juvenile court system. Currently, we are one of three states that still automatically treats 17-year-olds as adults, which leads to lower public safety, higher government spending, higher racial disparities in our justice system, and worse outcomes for our state's young people.

**[Insert why raising the age is important to you. For more information and talking points, visit <https://raisetheagewi.org/why-raise-the-age>.]**

For these reasons, please support and pass Raise the Age Legislation during this year's legislative session. Thank you for considering your support for Raise the Age legislation, which would make Wisconsin a more just and equitable place to live.

Thank you,

**[Your Name]**

**[Your Email Address]**

**[Your Phone Number - Optional]**

# Raise the Age (RTA) Is Right for Wisconsin

## Supported by Voters

- Forty-seven states process 17 year olds in their juvenile justice systems.<sup>1</sup>
- 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.”<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

## 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.<sup>4</sup>
- 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.<sup>5</sup>
- 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.<sup>6</sup>
- 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.<sup>7</sup>
- 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.<sup>8</sup>
- In 2019, a raise the age policy could have increased public safety and helped 17 year olds in 70 of Wisconsin’s 72 counties.<sup>9</sup>

## Results in Fiscal Savings

- Each youth in the adult system costs the state almost \$40,000 per year to incarcerate.<sup>10</sup>
- 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.”<sup>11</sup>
- 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.<sup>12</sup>
- 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.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup>
- 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.<sup>15</sup>

### **Protects Youth**

- Young people in the adult prison system are more likely to be sexually and physically abused than any other population.<sup>16</sup>
- The MacIver Institute reports that, despite comprising less than 1% of the adult prison population, juveniles represent over 20% of its sexual abuse victims.<sup>17</sup>
- Juveniles in the adult system are up to 36 times more likely to commit suicide compared to their adult counterparts.<sup>18</sup>
- 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.<sup>19</sup>
- A national study found that 97% of incarcerated youth had experienced childhood trauma.<sup>20</sup>
- 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.<sup>21</sup>
- Research indicates that nearly all youth will mature and age out of crime, especially with the right opportunities.<sup>22</sup>

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# Raise the Age FAQ



## **What does Raising the Age mean?**

Raising the Age in Wisconsin will ensure that youth will be treated as youth, not adults, by the legal system. Raise the Age Policy will raise the age of juvenile jurisdiction so that the juvenile court system will have original court jurisdiction over all 17-year-olds. When we Raise the Age, outcomes improve for our state's young people as a vast majority of justice-involved 17-year-olds will be tried and rehabilitated in the juvenile system instead of the adult system.

## **Do other states deal with 17 year-olds this way?**

No. Most other states treat 17 year-olds as the adolescents they are. In fact, Wisconsin is only one of 3 states that still utilizes this outdated practice. Across the country, states are recognizing the importance of raising the age. Louisiana, South Carolina, New York, Michigan, and North Carolina have all passed raise the age legislation in the past 10 years.

## **Who will be affected by Raising the Age?**

Raise the Age of juvenile court jurisdiction to include 17 year olds will affect thousands of young people each year. 17-year-olds who become justice-involved will be affected by this policy because all of them will start in the juvenile justice system. Wisconsin DOC 2019 data indicates that almost 9,000 17-year-olds will be affected each year, but this number is falling as crime rates among youth continue to drop.

## **What kind of crimes are these youth committing?**

The largest cohorts of youth arrests are for disorderly conduct, underaged drinking, possessing small amounts of marijuana, petty theft, or other minor infractions. Less than 3% of all juvenile arrests are for the FBI terms "violent crime".

## **Will those charged for the most heinous crimes still be tried in the juvenile system?**

Raising the Age would ensure that every young person's case would start in the juvenile system, and that only the most serious cases would be able to be moved to the adult court. For the most serious offenses, juvenile court judges, after reviewing the case, could decide that a youth would be better served in the adult court system and waive them to the adult system. However, raising the age sets the "default" for youth in the juvenile system, not the adult system.

### **How many young people will be affected by Raising the Age?**

In 2019, Wisconsin law enforcement made about 35,000 arrests of those under aged 18, spanning 70 of Wisconsin's 72 counties. Almost 9,000 of these arrests were of youth aged 17. Raise the Age legislation would provide original adult court jurisdiction for every single one of these arrests across the state. However, raise the age policies have been proven to speed the decline in juvenile arrests, and the juvenile court's emphasis on community-based rehabilitation is generally much less expensive than adult court confinement models.

### **Why does the issue have bipartisan support?**

Raise the Age appeals to traditionally conservative values such as fiscal responsibility and public safety, while also lowering incarceration rates and providing proper rehabilitation for those in the justice system, policies favored by Democrats. Finally, raising the age gets to the heart of what we all believe in; that our government should properly care for our state's young people and equip them for a healthy, successful life. In this partisan political environment, Raise the Age is one of the few policies almost everyone can agree on.

### **If the issue has bipartisan support, then why hasn't the law passed?**

There are a number of reasons why Raise the Age legislation has yet to pass over the finish line. First, raising the age involves transferring funds from the state budget to county budgets. This is because juvenile courts are run by counties, while the adult system is run by the state's corrections department. However, Governor Evers' budget includes sum-sufficient funding of raising the age, which addresses this problem. Finally, while this policy is popular across party lines, a small minority of people are still opposed to smart-on-crime policy, and have historically opposed this legislation. These two roadblocks have stopped raise the age legislation in the past.

### **Does Raise the Age help public safety?**

Raising the Age is a smart on crime policy that leads to safer communities and better outcomes for justice-involved youth. One of the most striking community benefits is the impressive reduction in future criminality among youth who are moved to the juvenile justice system. The Center for Disease control found that youth in the juvenile system have a 34% recidivism rate compared to their counterparts in the adult system, even when adjusted for other factors. This translates to thousands of youth who will leave the juvenile system and never return to the justice system in the future. Contrary to common belief, youth who make mistakes and get arrested are generally not individuals that have started down the path to an adult life of crime, and most will commit fewer crimes (or make smarter decisions) as they mature and become less impulsive. This may help explain why Raise the Age legislation is supported by both conservative and progressive advocacy organizations.

### **Does the Raise the Age Coalition support other juvenile justice reform efforts?**

The Raise the Age Coalition is a group of organizations partnered to pass Raise the Age legislation in the state of Wisconsin. Most members of the Raise the Age Coalition support additional juvenile justice reform efforts and broader criminal justice reform. However, our coalition has partnered together for one common goal: bringing 17 year olds back to the juvenile justice system.

### **How is this “fiscally responsible” if the Governor had to allocate funding to raise the age efforts?**

As previously mentioned, moving young people from the adult system to the juvenile system means transferring them from the state corrections system to county supervision. This transfer from state care to the counties mean that funding must follow. The transfer of funds from the state to counties does not detract from the long-term fiscal savings or indicate that raise the age policy is significantly more expensive. Studies from the University of Wisconsin, the Justice Policy Institute, Missouri State University, UCLA, and other organizations have demonstrated the long-term savings, expanded tax base, and strengthened workforce that results from bringing youth to the juvenile system. For example, a study from Missouri State University found that every young person brought back to the juvenile system will pay almost \$170,000 more in taxes over their lifetime.

Studies and research have also shown that the programming and approaches in the justice system are much more cost-effective than the expensive confinement model used in the adult system. A University of Wisconsin study conducted a rigorous cost-benefit analysis of 571 criminal justice programs, those most cost-beneficial in reducing future crime were targeted at juveniles. Of these, the five most cost-beneficial rehabilitation programs and the single most cost-beneficial prevention program were family-focused approaches. Children served by the adult system cannot receive family-focused interventions, while this approach is available in the juvenile system.



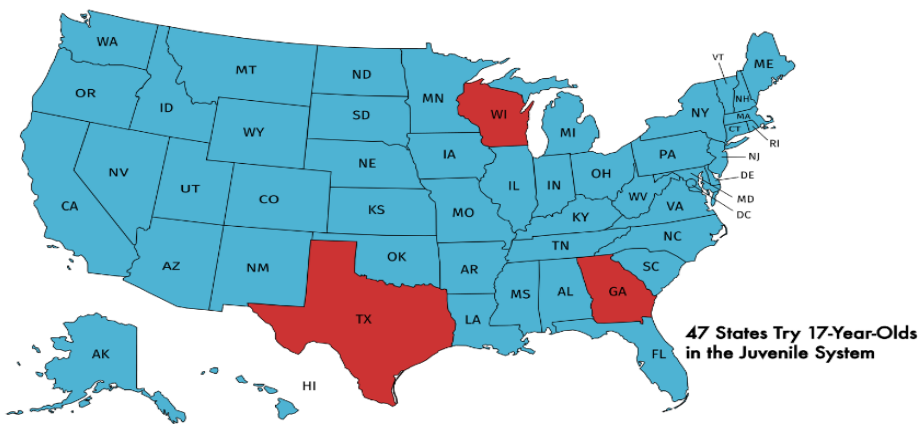


*Return 17-year-old youth to  
their rightful place  
in the YOUTH JUSTICE system*



Developed by the RTA Coalition | April 2021

**WISCONSIN IS ONE OF THREE STATES THAT STILL TREATS YOUNG PEOPLE WHO COMMIT CRIMINAL OFFENSES AS THOUGH THEY ARE ADULTS**



Under 1995 Wisconsin Act 77, general jurisdiction of the juvenile court was lowered from age 17 to 16, sending **ALL** 17-year-olds to adult courts in WI.

It's time for WI to acknowledge that **investing in the competency development** of adolescents is the most **informed, humane, and fiscally responsible** choice and to align state laws & policies accordingly.

## Informed

Local and national data tell us that justice involved youth have histories of trauma. Research tells us that trauma impacts brain development and often impairs reasoning, judgement, and impulse control.<sup>1</sup> Adolescence itself is a time of risk-taking and poor impulse control. Combine that with any sort of trauma history and the odds of a youth committing a criminal offense increase substantially. We know that:



In Wisconsin, 4 out of 5 youth referred to the youth justice system have a prior history with child protective services.<sup>2</sup>



The brain does not fully develop until after age 18, and adolescent brains differ from adults in three significant ways: 1) They lack mature capacity for self-regulation in emotionally charged contexts. 2) They are exceptionally sensitive to peer pressure and immediate incentives. 3) They are less able to make judgements and decisions that require future orientation.<sup>3</sup>

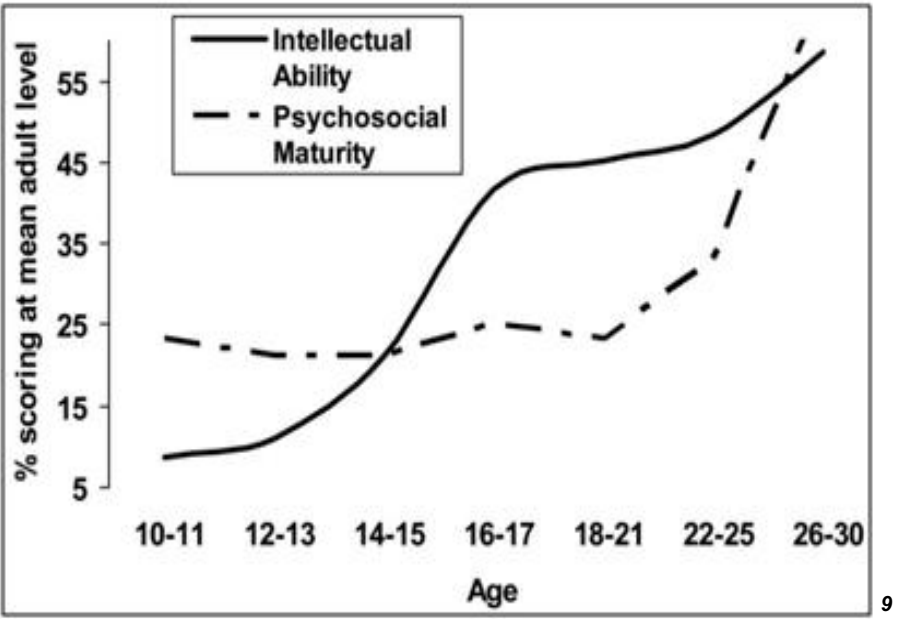


Youth offenders have higher rates of behavioral health problems<sup>4</sup> and education related disabilities<sup>5</sup> than the general youth population, which can interfere with rehabilitation.



Minority youth make up 26% of Wisconsin's youth population, yet they account for 67% of the incarcerated youth population.<sup>6</sup>


“The juvenile justice system was established in the United States about 100 years ago with the goal of diverting youthful offenders from the destructive punishments of criminal courts and encouraging rehabilitation based on the individual juvenile’s needs. This system was to differ from adult or criminal court in a number of ways. It was to focus on a child or adolescent as a person in need of assistance, not on the act that brought him or her before the court.”<sup>8</sup> Those creating the law recognized the fundamental differences between the intellectual abilities and psychosocial maturity of young people, especially as compared to adults.





**Ch.938.01(2) Wis. Stats. states, “It is the intent of the legislature to promote a juvenile justice system capable of dealing with the problem of juvenile delinquency, a system which will protect the community, impose accountability for unlawful acts, and equip juvenile offenders with competencies to live responsibly and productively...”.**


## Humane

Humane treatment is "treatment intended to have a civilizing or refining effect on people." We know that:

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Putting youth in locked environments does little, if anything, to reduce future offending, whereas therapeutic interventions focused on internalized behavior change do.<sup>3</sup>
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•"Because adult facilities are not designed to handle the security or developmental needs of children, these children are often at significant risk and rarely have access to appropriate treatment."<sup>10</sup>
- 

"Youth in adult facilities are as much as 36 times more likely to commit suicide than their peers in a juvenile facility and 9 times more likely than their peers in the general population."<sup>11</sup>
- 

Juvenile courts offer humane and effective programs that keep youth in school, address underlying traumas, and engage the whole family in the treatment process.

“The justice system doesn’t have to be a bad process or a bad experience. We need a system that is more loving and less punitive. Ask questions: are you ok? Why are you mad at the world? Why are you doing this?”<sup>7</sup>

~ WI Youth Leader

“The question should be: ‘What conditions set you up for success?’”<sup>7</sup>

~ WI Youth Leader

## Fiscally Responsible

Policies that needlessly confine youth have an immediate cost for taxpayers and our communities. Not only do taxpayers foot the bill for youth confinement to the tune of hundreds of thousands of dollars per year, the impact of poor policy choices ratchets up long-term costs, including those associated with<sup>12</sup>:



Lack of Economic Opportunity



Tax Revenue

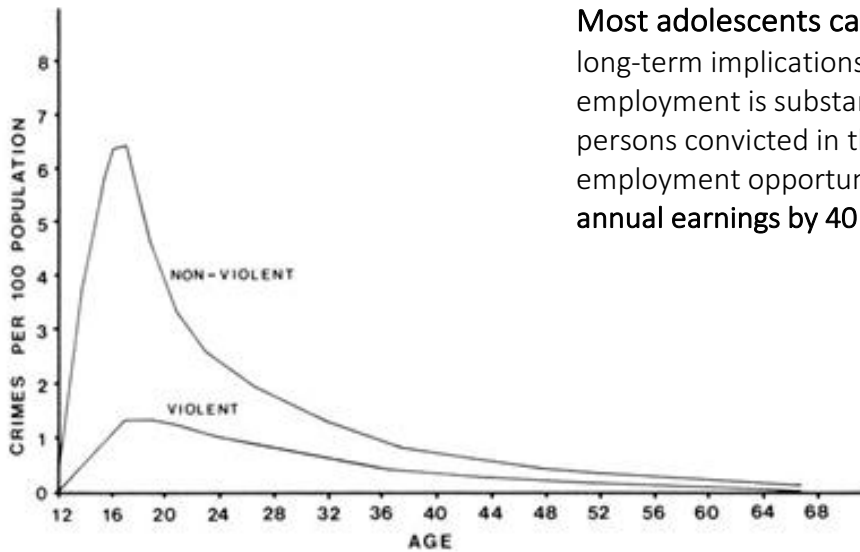


Increased Reliance on Public Assistance



Increased Recidivism

In addition, incarceration during adolescence and early adulthood is independently associated with worse physical and mental health outcomes during adulthood.<sup>13</sup> Plus, there is little benefit to doing so, as committing youth to large institutions that fail to provide for their developmental needs is ineffective in furthering the goal of crime prevention.<sup>14</sup>



Most adolescents can and do stop offending; however, the long-term implications of their arrest as youth on their future employment is substantial. Numerous studies demonstrate that persons convicted in the adult system face severely limited employment opportunities. In fact, serving time lowers a man's annual earnings by 40 percent.<sup>9</sup>

**Wisconsin's policy is not aligned with the needs of the workforce.**



**It's time to**

In April of 2019, Forward Analytics shared the following:

- Wisconsin businesses are facing a worker shortage that could persist for decades, if not longer.
- The state does not have enough young people to replace retiring baby boomers and migration patterns have not shifted for the better.
- Since 2015, traditional Wisconsin migration patterns have shifted negatively.
- Without the ability to naturally increase the workforce, growth must come from higher labor force participation or inward migration.
- Shifting migration patterns between 2010-2015 raise concerns about future workforce growth.
- Wisconsin continues to lose young people as they age from early to late 20s.
- The decline in young families moving to Wisconsin means smaller gains in the number of children in the state.<sup>15</sup> Policies that promote youth and young adult well-being could change this trajectory.





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**Return 17-year-old youth to  
their rightful place  
in the YOUTH JUSTICE system**

