



STATEMENT OF SUPPORT

Citizens for Juvenile Justice and the other organizations and individuals listed below support including 17-year-olds in the Massachusetts juvenile justice system.

Right now in Massachusetts, *all 17-year-olds accused of a crime are automatically treated as adults - regardless of the circumstances or severity of the offense.* This means that 17-year-olds are held in jail with adults and tried in adult criminal court. They may be sentenced to confinement in adult prison. Whether they are convicted or not, they will forever bear the stigma of an adult criminal record. This policy sweeps thousands of 17-year-olds into the adult criminal system each year. All Massachusetts citizens would benefit if the vast majority of 17-year-olds, who enter the system for minor, non-violent offenses, were returned to juvenile jurisdiction. The rare cases involving serious offenses could still be handled in the adult system.

1. Trying and sentencing 17-year-olds in the adult system *undermines public safety* and reduces the likelihood of positive outcomes for youth. Research shows that, compared with their peers in the juvenile system, young people relegated to the adult criminal system are:

- more likely to reoffend, to reoffend more quickly and to reoffend by committing more serious crimes;
- mixed with older and more serious offenders who have a negative influence;
- at greater risk for suicide and physical and sexual abuse when in confinement;
- faced with serious barriers to future employment, education, and housing as a result of their adult criminal records.

2. Raising the age of juvenile jurisdiction makes practical and economic sense. The juvenile justice system is specifically designed to deal with adolescents – and does so more effectively, and cost-effectively, than the adult system.

- With a special cadre of judges, juvenile probation officers, an experienced youth corrections agency, and procedures that protect the privacy of children, the juvenile system has a much greater chance of ensuring successful outcomes for kids than the adult system.
- In addition to being held accountable, and confined when necessary, kids in the juvenile system must also attend school and participate in other rehabilitative programs (e.g., substance abuse, anger management.)
- Parental notification and involvement is mandatory.
- With juvenile crime rates at historic lows, the system now has the capacity to absorb 17-year-olds.
- By including most 17-year-olds in a more effective rehabilitative system and utilizing the less costly community-based services already available for juveniles, the Commonwealth can save money.

3. Adult court and sanctions would still be available for the small number of 17-year-olds accused of the most serious offenses. Youth 14 and over who are accused of murder are automatically transferred to adult court. Those accused of other serious crimes can be indicted as “youthful offenders,” which carries the possibility of an adult sentence.

4. Treating 17-year-olds who get in trouble with the law as adults is out-of-step with national and international standards. 38 other states and the federal government use 18 as the age of adult criminal jurisdiction and other states are moving in that direction. Massachusetts’ policy also contravenes international treaties and norms.

5. Trying and sentencing 17-year-olds in adult court is inconsistent with almost all other laws in Massachusetts that use 18 as the threshold for adulthood. For example, a person must be 18 to vote, sign a contract, and serve on a jury

6. Raising the age of juvenile jurisdiction makes developmental sense. Recent research on adolescent brain development confirms what many adults (especially parents) know: most 17-year-olds lack adult maturity, particularly in their judgment and impulse control. Fortunately, most develop better judgment and control as they get older. Handling these high-school-aged kids in the adult criminal system ignores this developmental reality – and makes their task of growing up much more difficult.

17-year-olds *belong* in the juvenile justice system; raising the age of juvenile court jurisdiction will keep them on the *right* side of the law.

Sincerely,

Citizens for Juvenile Justice

