

MORE THAN WORDS

2024 ISSUE BRIEF: EMERGING ADULT JUSTICE



YOUNG ADULTS DO NOT BELONG IN THE ADULT CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

THE PROBLEM WITH THE STATUS QUO

Massachusetts currently spends the most money on young adults in the justice system but gets the worst outcomes. Our failure is costly - in taxpayer dollars, the devastating impact on the community, and the loss of human potential of too many young adults.

20%

Emerging adults make up 10% of the state population, but represent more than 29% of arrests, 23% of Houses of Correction commitments and 20% of Department of Corrections commitments.

25 YRS

Brain science shows that young adult brains continue to develop until age 25. There is a well-documented drop in criminal misconduct (the "age-crime curve" of self-desisting from crime) that comes with maturation into the early twenties.

80%

Approx. 80% of individuals in the adult criminal justice system were once in foster care. Poor transition supports and the long-term impacts of childhood trauma have created a "trauma to prison pipeline."

47%

47% of people in adult jails have not completed high school, while young people in DYS are required to attend school every day and have easier access to special education resources.

44K

An adult record saddles young people with a long-term barrier for employment, education, housing, licensure, and more. Justice-involved people face more than 44,000 legal sanctions.

55%

All this means that adult prisons lead to bad results for young people. Young adults leaving adult prisons in MA have a 55% re-conviction rate, while teens leaving the Department of Youth Services have a much lower re-conviction rate of 22%

WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE

Rather than create special emerging adult initiatives in the adult system, we need to divert young adults into community programs or to be served in the juvenile system. Massachusetts already recognized emerging adults as a distinct population: our child welfare, healthcare, education, labor and other agencies have all created dedicated policies and programs to support young adults past age 18.

The Commonwealth should be creating alternative strategies and off ramps to move as many young adults out of the adult system as possible. We need more diversion programs, to raise the age to serve more in the juvenile justice system, and transparent data on the harms perpetuated by our systems.

HOW WE DO THIS AT MORE THAN WORDS

- We are a lead partner for a grant-funded pilot program with the Suffolk County District Attorney's Office, the Center for Law Brain and Behavior and other community partners to divert emerging adults at the Boston Municipal Court.
- Our staff accompanies youth to court to communicate with defenders, prosecutors, and Judges to ensure a problem solving approach that will keep our youth on track and out of jail.
- We center the voices and perspective of young people in District Attorney and Mayoral debates, roundtable conversations, and meetings with elected officials and system leaders.

RELATED LEGISLATION

- **Raise the Age (H1710/S924)** - End the automatic prosecution of older adolescents as adults by raising the age of the juvenile jurisdiction and the related collateral consequences.
- **Diversion (H1495/S940)** - Allow judges to consider a youth's conduct when charged under certain low-level offenses.
- **Expungement (H1451)** - Increase the number of cases eligible for expungement and limit FBI access to fingerprint records of youth.
- **Data Transparency (H1802/S931)** - Require data be collected and publicly reported at major legal system decision points disaggregated for juveniles by age, gender, etc.



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More Than Words (MTW) is a social enterprise that empowers youth who are in the foster care system, court-involved, homeless, or out of school to take charge of their lives by taking charge of a business. Youth work 15-20 hrs/week in a \$4M used book and clothing business to learn skills, while also participating in programming to set goals and plan for success in education, work, and life.

The Power is Yours is a youth-led advocacy team at MTW focusing on issues in the child welfare and criminal justice systems.