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**Contact:** Lael E.H. Chester, Columbia University Justice Lab,  
lec2115@columbia.edu

## **Emerging Adult Justice Project Submitted a Report Supporting Reforming and Expanding Colorado’s “Youth Offender System” to Include All Emerging Adults**

NEW YORK, NY – The Columbia Justice Lab’s Emerging Adult Justice Project ([EAJP](#)), with the support of the Colorado Department of Corrections, submitted a Report on February 1, 2022 to Colorado’s House and Senate Judiciary Committees making research-based recommendations to transform the state’s Youth Offender System (YOS). The report explains the impact of including young people up to age 25 who commit felony offenses in the YOS and how that expansion should be implemented. Making the changes recommended in the report will provide a greater number of youths more developmentally appropriate, fairer, and more effective justice responses, and will improve public safety.

Colorado’s YOS is a special sentencing provision and separate prison system currently for people between the ages of 14 and 19 at the time of the offense (and sentenced before the 21st birthday) accused of certain crimes, or who are transferred from a regular DOC sentence before the age of 24. Through the YOS, young people receive shorter sentences and more access to programming suited for emerging adults. The YOS is currently a four-stage program that begins with a rigorous 30–45-day boot camp-like intake process, followed by a period of continued institutional confinement in the highly structured YOS which operates on a merits system. The young person spends the last 6-12 months of their sentence under community supervision.

The EAJP’s report outlines the rich body of research that supports expanding YOS to include emerging adults up to age 25 who are accused of felonies. Neuroscientific research shows that brain development continues into at least the mid-20s, particularly in the areas of the brain that are most responsible for the risky behaviors that might lead to lawbreaking. Social science research similarly shows that the transition to adulthood and development of maturity, including reaching significant milestones that help a person move away from lawbreaking, now occurs in the mid-20s and even later for

many justice-involved young people who have experienced trauma. Expanding the YOS through age 25 aligns with research and will improve youth outcomes by providing a greater number of young people with more developmentally appropriate and effective justice responses.

The EAJP's report also listed 21 concrete recommendations to transform the YOS system to better align its practices with modern research and national standards. Among the key recommendations were eliminating the out-of-date and harmful boot camp model, ensuring the safety of youth and staff, enhancing trauma-informed care and increasing mental/behavioral health services, allowing for record expungement, extending juvenile confidentiality provisions to YOS youth, and protecting due process rights. Implementing the EAJP's recommendations, including expanding the YOS to include young people through age 25 accused of felonies, will provide developmentally appropriate programming for more young people, improving their outcomes and increasing public safety.

"Colorado has an important opportunity to transform the YOS and expand it to better serve more emerging adults and improve public safety," says Lael Chester, Director of the Emerging Adult Justice Project at Columbia University's Justice Lab. "I commend the Colorado legislature for seeking input to ensure the implementation of the most promising practices, and the Colorado Department of Corrections for its commitment to transforming the system to improve outcomes for the people in their charge."

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*Information on Columbia University Justice Lab's Emerging Adult Project can be found [here](#).*