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New Report: Emerging adults disproportionately incarcerated in Illinois and for low level offenses in Chicago; Racial disparities in the criminal justice system worst for emerging adults.

Policy makers urged to raise the age of juvenile jurisdiction and create other developmentally appropriate justice responses for emerging adults to enhance public safety.

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The Justice Lab at Columbia University released a new report today at an event in Chicago, entitled [*Emerging Adult Justice in Illinois: Towards an Age-Appropriate Approach*](#). The report explains that the current justice system—which automatically prosecutes and sentences all emerging adults (ages 18 – 25) in the adult criminal justice system—generates remarkably poor results in terms of youth outcomes, racial and socio-economic equity, and public safety:

- Emerging adults comprised 10 percent of the general population in Illinois, yet accounted for 34 percent of total arrests and 28 percent of individuals sentenced to incarceration in Illinois state prisons in 2013.
- Of those emerging adults admitted to state prisons in 2013, 73 percent were incarcerated for non-violent offenses.
- Over a third of youth ages 18-21 admitted to the Cook County Jail in 2017—2,252 young people—were charged with misdemeanors or other petty offenses.
- African American emerging adults are incarcerated at a rate 9.4 times greater than their white peers in Illinois. Illinois has one of the highest incarceration rates of African American emerging adults in the country, three times higher than New York and 2.5 times higher than California.
- Nationally, 3 out of 4 emerging adults released from incarceration are rearrested within 3 years. These poor public safety outcomes are exacerbated by significant barriers to reentry, such as a growing prevalence of substance use disorders and homelessness among this age group.

Highlighting research in neurobiology, developmental psychology, and sociology, the [*Justice Lab report*](#) explains that emerging adults are a distinct developmental group and that most will mature out of crime in their mid-20s if given the opportunities to do so. The brains of young people continue developing into at least their mid-20s, far later than formerly thought. Emerging adults are more volatile in emotionally charged settings,

more susceptible to peer influence, greater risk takers, and less future-oriented than fully mature adults. Yet, the criminal justice system treats emerging adults almost the same way as 40- or 50-year-olds, failing to provide effective, developmentally appropriate responses, and interfering with the normal maturity process.

“These disastrous justice outcomes are troubling but hardly surprising,” says Vincent Schiraldi, Senior Research Scientist and co-director of the Columbia Justice Lab. “Research shows what every parent of a young person knows, that young people are still maturing and should be treated in a developmentally appropriate way that provides them with a chance to turn their lives around. Publicizing their names when they make mistakes, putting them into jails with older adults, and denying them the rehabilitation that is available in the juvenile justice system makes no sense.”

“The Illinois Parent and Teacher Association [PTA] recognizes that youth ages 18 to 24 are developmentally different than those 25 and older,” says Brian Minsker, the President of Illinois PTA. “As we recommended in our 2017 [report](#), it is time for our justice system to recognize and address such developmental needs of all system-involved youth.”

Despite its challenges, emerging adulthood is also a period of opportunity, as youth are malleable and can be influenced by positive peers and enriching, supportive environments. “Illinois has been experimenting with alternative interventions for justice-involved youth with great success for many years,” explains Elizabeth Clarke, Executive Director of Juvenile Justice Initiative. “Our experience has shown that age-appropriate, community-based programs, such as the Redeploy Illinois, can achieve better youth outcomes, reduce recidivism and enhance public safety while resulting in significant cost savings. We should strive to extend this opportunity to all our young people, including emerging adults, who are at a critical developmental stage in their lives.”

As the [Justice Lab report](#) shows, Illinois policymakers have already begun to experiment with policies and practices that treat emerging adults in a distinct manner. Selen Siringil Perker, Senior Research Associate and lead author, notes, “as the home of the first juvenile court in America, I am heartened to see Illinois pursue reform initiatives focused on emerging adult justice. These include, for example, a new restorative justice community court in North Lawndale to serve youth ages 18 to 26 charged with non-violent felonies and misdemeanors.”

A legislative proposal to gradually raise the age of juvenile justice in misdemeanor cases up to age 21 was also filed in the 2018 session of the Illinois legislature. “This legislative initiative is not without precedent,” explains State Senator Laura Fine, who sponsored the bill when she was a State Representative. “Illinois successfully raised the age of juvenile jurisdiction from age 17 to 18 for misdemeanors in 2010, then for felony cases in 2014. Despite concerns that the expansion would overwhelm the juvenile justice system, juvenile arrests, detention and incarceration rates all plummeted after the change in law. We did it before and we can do it again.”

Meanwhile, the Illinois legislature passed a new bill that provides parole eligibility for most youth who are under age 21 at the time of conviction. The Justice Lab report noted that other areas of public policy, ranging from laws on alcohol consumption to recent legislative proposals regarding gun purchases, treat emerging adults up to age 21 differently than older adults.

"It is important to rely on cutting edge research when reforming the criminal justice system," Cook County State's Attorney Kimberly M. Foxx said. "That is why I am grateful for the Columbia University Justice Lab's [report](#) on emerging adults in the criminal justice system. Our office is in review of this report and we look forward to collaborating with them and other stakeholders in the future to address the emerging adult population in Cook County."

Illinois' emerging adult justice reform efforts are indicative of a national movement to enhance public safety by providing more individualized, tailored, and developmentally appropriate responses to emerging adults. "Earlier this year, Vermont became the first state in the country to enact a law gradually raising the upper age of juvenile jurisdiction to a youth's 20th birthday by 2022," says Lael Chester, coauthor and Director of the Emerging Adult Project at Columbia Justice Lab. "There also have been bills filed to raise the age past the 18th birthday in Connecticut and Massachusetts in 2018. Many states will be watching Illinois with interest."
