

The Honorable Aaron Michlewitz
Chair, House Committee on Ways and Means
State House, Room 356 Boston, MA 02133

The Honorable Claire Cronin
Chair, House Judiciary Committee
State House, Room 136 Boston, MA 02133

The Honorable Denise Garlick
Vice Chair, House Committee on Ways and Means
State House, Room 238 Boston, MA 02133

The Honorable Michael Day
Vice Chair, House Judiciary Committee
State House, Room 136 Boston, MA 02133

July 17, 2020

Dear Chair Michlewitz, Chair Cronin, Vice Chair Day, Vice Chair Garlick and Committee Members,

Under the law, 18-year-olds are adults for the purpose of criminal prosecution. The law, of course, doesn't have children. Think about your kids, or young people you know. I imagine my own 8 and 10 year olds at age 18, and I know they will need guidance and support well beyond that milestone. Their late teens and early twenties will be marked by some bone-headed decisions. The idea of them going to adult prison for mistakes they may make at age 18 is gut-wrenching.

As CEO of [More Than Words](#), a nonprofit empowering court-involved and system-involved youth, I am heartbroken seeing that exact circumstance play out time again. The youth who need us the most are derailed and criminalized rather than diverted and supported.

As the House takes up S.2820, I am asking for your leadership to include language to raise the age of the juvenile justice system. This is a crucial issue for racial justice. Only 25% of Massachusetts' young adult population is Black or Latino, but 70% of young adults incarcerated in state prisons and 57% of young adults incarcerated in county jails are people of color.

This move will align with brain science research, is backed by data and experience with effective diversion strategies, and will yield better outcomes for youth and our Commonwealth. Young people detained or committed to the Department of Youth Services (DYS) are mandated to attend school every day and have easier access to special education resources, decreasing their likelihood of dropping out of high school. By contrast, an adult record creates a barrier for employment. The DHS census is down, and there is capacity to serve these young people. We just need to lift up our sense of justice to use it.

Please listen to our young people. Despite COVID, they have been learning about advocating for Raise the Age legislation. You can [hear directly from our youth on our website](#). We have also included some of their testimony in this document.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

With gratitude,
Jodi Rosenbaum, CEO
Youth of More Than Words

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MORE THAN WORDS

RAISE THE AGE

YOUTH TESTIMONY



Johnathan, Partner at More Than Words

I think we should change this law. At 18, most kids are still in High School. It is different than if you do something and are 30 and have already gone thru that part of growing up and life. I was experimenting and figuring life out. The system doesn't have a good understanding of who I am and where I come from.

When you are a teenager, going to jail makes things worse. There is no support. You just go and do time. At DYS you have to go to school and get services. And, you are really stuck if you have an adult record. That is your future.



Jacob, Partner at More Than Words

Research has found that adult and teen brains work differently. Adults think with the prefrontal cortex, the brain's rational center. This is the part of the brain that responds to situations with good judgment and an awareness of long-term consequences. Teens process information with the amygdala, the emotional center. The connections between the emotional and decision-making centers of the brain are still developing until about age 25. The young adult brain is still developing; this development is influenced – *positively or negatively* – by their environment.

The first time I got arrested was just a few months after turning 18, this affected me well into my 20s. I am now close to 23 and a rehabilitated individual in contrast to the circumstances my life or mental health were once in. Throughout my case hearings I didn't have a full understanding of the judicial system/what it meant to take a plea/having a felony on my record, regardless of some lawyer interpretation. I hadn't yet been presented with the opportunity to learn about law in a way that could have helped me in this situation. Please consider my statement.

Kenny, Alumni of More Than Words

I am 24 years old. I came to the US from Haiti when I was 6 years old. I never had a family that took care of me. I was placed in DCF custody for abuse and neglect where I spent the rest of my childhood. I think I was moved around about 10 placements and picked up a few juvenile charges which were handled by juvenile probation.

When I was 18 I got adult charges for stealing with a group of youth. I went to jail for the first time for a few months. I was with people much older than me, many with much worse violent crimes. It is almost like a set up for failure. It really screws with your head. I wasn't convicted of those charges, and when I got out I completed my high school certificate, but DCF closed my case shortly after I got out of jail.

I was 19 and homeless. I didn't have any information about how to survive on the streets. Being homeless, you don't think clearly. I made a desperate choice to try and get money and was arrested. I didn't hurt anyone physically, but I shouldn't have done it. I don't think I had the best legal representation and took a plea for a felony.

I spent 3 years in state prison. It was tough. There is a lot that goes on in there. I went to solitary a lot of times because the environment was really hard for me to function. I was assaulted, I got in fights and once had my jaw broken. For a lot of people like me, prison is a hard place to make your best choices. There is a lot of yelling and screaming. There are a lot of drugs inside.

More Than Words was the only one who still stayed in touch with me while I was in prison. While I was there, I found out that I was also facing deportation to go back to Haiti where I hadn't been since I was a little kid. I finished my sentence but was transferred to ICE, but More Than Words found the right lawyer to help me. In Oct, 2018 I was released. Even though I was out, I was homeless again. I faced a lot of struggles to figure out how I would live my life as a 24 year old. MTW helped me find services and gave me the opportunity to work at MTW again.

I have been out of jail and getting on track for over a year and I am doing well. I should not have been in adult jail. I should not have been made homeless by the state. I was a kid. And the state didn't do everything to take care of me, but then it had no problem sending me to jail. I think it could have been a lot different if I went to DYS when I started to get into trouble. If I could have gotten more support past the age of 18. I am here now to share this with you to help make this change. I don't want other kids to go through what I did.

Katie, Partner at More Than Words

The harsh zero-tolerance policies of the school-to-prison pipeline puts disadvantages youths in prison with adults... In adult prisons they will lose out of opportunities that are available in the juvenile system like offers of educational, vocational, and psychological services as well as contact with family and friends. With these services it helps lower the recidivism rate. However, if the youth is put into the adult prison system, they're thirty-four times more likely to recidivate.

Instead of punishing youths, we should rehabilitate them, not ruin their lives before it has even started. We must show them compassion and sympathy. Massachusetts, please raise the age to twenty before putting youth into adult prisons.



Alidio, Alumni of More Than Words

I am writing from MCI Shirley prison, as I am currently incarcerated and serving a 4 year sentence. I am being held in a maximum security prison, and almost everyone in the unit with me is serving a life sentence. I was convicted as an Armed Career Criminal at the age of 20. How can you be a career criminal when you have hardly lived your life?

I grew up being involved in the court system, between juvenile court and the Department of Youth Services. DYS was persistent on bettering my future. I just wasn't ready to put the effort in. My caseworkers set me up with job interviews and programs, but I was still getting into trouble. The environment I was living in didn't promote work and school. I did not have stable housing, and was bouncing from couch to couch for a period of time.

By the time I was 18, I was fed up with dealing with the court system and having people tell me what I should be doing and listing all the things I was doing wrong. I did not feel like I had realistic options. I looked to my caseworker for guidance, but she was essentially forced out of my life once I "aged out of the system." I was disappointed to know that a person who committed to my well-being was now gone. The door shut on me when I turned 18.

It wasn't until I turned 20 years old that I really changed my perspective of what I wanted to do with my life. I know that if I still had my juvenile resources in my life until that time, I would've had more job opportunities, college options, maybe even my own apartment and driver's license. I just wish that I had those resources around me for a bit longer because I didn't actually want the help – and wasn't READY for the help – until it was too late for me. By then it was too late to look at the system for the help I wanted and needed.

The biggest failure of the court system was treating me like an adult when I wasn't one. No one stuck around after I turned 18 to help teach me to be an adult, and then penalized me when I made the wrong choices. For me, the adult system has been a waste of time. We should be taking the money spent to incarcerate young adults, and spend money on more resources for teens who can avoid being in that predicament to begin with - just by having what he/she needs while still a juvenile. The system bears the responsibility to help a juvenile offender or potential juvenile offender from re-offending or offending in the future. Raising the juvenile age wouldn't just help keep people out of adult prison, but it would also give them more time with resources they truly need, supports they are lacking, and more motivation into bettering their futures to keep them off the streets and out of adult prison.

Samir, Partner at More Than Words

When people are young, they make mistakes. We all make mistakes. Just because you turn 18 doesn't make you an adult, you are still developing and working on yourself. People need more chances at that age. We need to increase the age so young people can finish their education and get services. That's what makes things safer. When you go to adult jail, it is traumatizing. Youth are no longer thinking like a teenager when you send them there, locked up with people so much older. When youth get out of adult jail, they are not the same. You haven't helped them."



Jasmine, Partner at More Than Words

I have to say that I am severely disappointed. Young adults are able to be pushed into an adult prison. Especially people of color. That is not acceptable.

I have close friends of mine who have been thrown into jail when they were just minors. A friend of mine was in the foster care system, dealing with many hardships. He got thrown in an adult prison just because he was having struggles and made mistakes and no one knew what to do with him.

Why do you think it's acceptable to lock them up for 10 plus years because you don't want to do your job and help them? They're not able to finish school, get their diploma, rebuild their lives. It is time to stop throwing away the key. The appropriate human brain is not developed until you are 25.

How is someone supposed to learn from their mistakes if they're stuck in prison for the most of their lives? DO BETTER & BE BETTER. Period.



Milka, Associate at More Than Words

They think when you turn 18 you don't need any more help and you are completely developed. But when you're 18 you're still learning. It's not about the age it's about how your brain develops.

When you grow up in a community with a lot of violence and drugs it can be hard to get yourself on the right track, or get a job, it's easy to get involved in things that will lead you to jail.



JQ, Senior Partner at More Than Words

We should raise the age because being arrested and going to adult jail and being under 21 is not right. People's brains normally don't fully develop until around the age of 25. Some people have no choice but to accept the environment they're in, and sometimes it may not be a good one, sadly. This absolutely affects people when they commit crime is the environment they are in and the people surrounding them.

I have been in and out of jail a lot, unfortunately. It is almost entirely my fault. But it is also the government's fault. The reason I say that is that I was around these bad influences in school, in my neighborhood, almost everywhere I was, and caused me to want to be under the influence too. I would like for us to take action and do everything possible to raise the age in which people end up going to adult jail, if they end up in the sad situation of being arrested. It's just not fair.

Ryder, Senior Partner at More Than Words

I believe that everyone deserves a second chance. No one should feel limited or haunted by their past mistakes, especially if those mistakes are ones they made when they were young. I studied psychology in college, and one thing I remember is that our brains are not fully developed until our mid-20's. That is when our prefrontal cortex is fully developed, the part of our brain that determines our personality and helps with decision-making.

If people had determined my fate based upon my behavior when I was 18, 19, or 20 years old, I would not be working, and I would not be living independently. In fact, I would probably be in a psychiatric institution because I have a history of mental illness and doctors told me that I would never have a meaningful life outside of a psychiatric facility. I was able to prove them wrong, and create a life worth living for myself.

There are so many black and brown kids who don't get that opportunity to create a meaningful life for themselves. Instead of receiving the support, love, and kindness that they need, many are thrown into state-funded systems like DYS, DCF, and DMH, while many more are put in prison, with people much older than them.

When you try these folks as adults, when you treat them as though their brains are fully developed when they are not, you are setting them up for failure. This is why so many people, including myself, feel that this game is rigged and something needs to change.

Adam, Associate at More Than Words

It's your obligation to go through with this instead of condemning youth to a cycle they can't get out of. Youth you are imprisoning are legally adults who can't pay taxes. I don't want my money and taxes going to locking people up. This is irresponsible and shows you don't care.

Luis, Partner at More Than Words

Raise the age and continue raising it until we see improvements in our communities and positive outcomes. I believe that this will have the most positive outcomes because there will be less kids in the adult justice system. As citizens and taxpayers we would not be investing in the trauma being inflicted on young people. Lawmakers are responsible for this; young people shouldn't be in jail with much older people. You are condemning them to more trauma that will unravel this person. Generational trauma continues and you are the reason that happens because you choose not to listen to the citizens' needs.

If youth don't have stable household, and everything we are inflict on young people we are asking them to deal with alone when they are not developed yet. We need to invest in hopes and dreams before any crime happens. We should not have to pay this much after 18 to incarcerate if we can heavily invest in their schools, mental health



(these are things youth get at DYS) to combat generational poverty. We are still breaking the chains of colonization. 300 years this has continued generational trauma. This law affects people we know, people who struggle. If you care about young people of color, you need to support this. You have the power to prevent people of color from being caught in this.

Indigo, Associate at More Than Words

I'm 21 and I have adult charges hanging over my head.... There are youth who are like me who want into the medical field, who have the potential to achieve their goals, and it's not fair. I don't want to be stuck working a cashier position all my life.

Christina, Partner at More Than Words

I love that we are trying to get this Raise the Age done and pushing for something that needs to happen. So many kids today have to deal with so much that happened to them and forced to live in a reality where society doesn't love them and doesn't care where they end up.

I've never been to jail, but a lot of people in my family have. It hurts to wonder what we would have been like if it hadn't happened- if my uncle hadn't stolen that 1 thing from the store when he was 18. Would he and others be a happier family? I want to prevent that from happening to more people.



Everyone deserves a proper chance to get it together. I am almost 18 and I can't imagine going through the adult legal system as I am now. I barely feel able to schedule a Dr appointment by myself. It is wild to think about the # of people facing this part of our world they are not ready for yet. Raise the Age needs to happen. It needs to happen for the world, for the future of the US. We will be a better a place for it.

Shakye, More Than Words

I am asking for your support on raise the age. As you know youth under the age of 20's brains are not fully developed and we may make impulsive decisions that may get us in trouble. Throwing us into adult prisons is not the answer. Juvenile systems will allow us to be accountable but also finish our high school diploma.

Teens of color are not given the right and proper way of growing emotionally or mentally, which is caused by the lack of teaching programs in our community to help coach teens into the right direction. It is nearly impossible for our next generation to prosper because their parents have been caught up in the criminal justice system. Not allowing them to grow will lead to future generations without leaders that look like them.

Raise the age will give young people of color a real chance to be productive citizens of MA. Adolescents' mistakes should not hold them back. If Black Lives Matter to you, then you will support this bill and let equality be for everyone and not just those who can afford a high price attorney.

Kayla, More Than Words

They're charging kids with adult crimes. They're trying to make them do adult time. That just doesn't fit together. You are trying to make a child grow up too fast.

Sameen, Senior Partner at More Than Words

Young adults and minors, especially those who are of color, are getting targeted to be incarcerated and treated unfairly like adults due to situations they need help on which they do not receive.

It is baffling that in 2020, we are still facing this unsolved issue that is harming kids and their futures. Minors do not have fully developed minds, and need guidance and support no matter what they're like, what the situation is like, and what they do. POC kids can face discrimination and unfairness by the system as much as POC adults do, that that says something about the system. These kids need help. They need guidance. They need support in becoming a better person. When a minor does not receive that help, guidance, and support, and instead get sent to jail like adults, they are being set up for failure at such a young age. It can ruin their future. It can ruin their chance of getting a job. It can ruin their mental state further.

Alexis, Partner at More Than Words

I was born and raised in Dorchester MA, as well as my entire family. Growing up I came from poverty stricken neighborhoods where we didn't have much but we made the best out of what we did have. All my life I've been a victim to violence and crime, sometimes personally, sometimes from the outside looking in. I've grown up with friends who have been involved with DCF, DYS, both, or worse.



Although their actions were in no way excusable the people locking them up need to take into account that they are still human beings. They are still young adults learning how to maneuver through life. Some do not have the proper guidance or resources to make the best decisions.

You gather POC and throw them in these very poor, crime ridden neighborhoods where there is nothing to do but resort to the violence that they are being exposed to from the time they are children. This system was meticulously designed for POC to fail simply because of our skin color.

Let me elaborate. America is predominantly white totaling to a whopping 76.3%. Black/African Americans only make up 13.4% of the population, Natives/Native Americans 1.3%, and Asians/Asian American make up 5.9%. My point in bringing this up is POC make up about 80% of the jail population. Statistically speaking we are overpowered, yet we are still feared. People fear what they don't understand. Understand this, we are systematically cursed. We are products of generational curses. Understand we are no different from one another.

Please don't look at our children as a nuisance but instead grant them the same help and effort as you would one of your own. All they need is someone who cares not because they have to but because it's the right thing to do. Please raise the age for youth in the system so that they have a second chance at a new beginning. Show them that they do not have to succumb to the pressures of their everyday life, that there is a better way out.

Scott, Senior Partner at More Than Words

Youth don't get a record at DYS and so they have more opportunities to succeed with job applications and their future. The environment in adult system is not healthy. You are going to jail with people a lot older than you and it doesn't make sense when you aren't even grown and an adult yet.

I recently had a friend who got caught up when he was still in high school. He didn't get a chance to graduate. He made a dumb mistake and went to jail for over a year for stealing something and he had just turned 18. I hope he can get back on track, but it is really difficult if you are in that environment.

To survive in adult jail you have to get accustomed to that environment, the violence. So, when you come out, it is impossible to be the same person. When you come out, you are mostly changed but not for the better. You feel like everything is stacked against you. You don't feel like you know what a safe environment is; it is like being in a dungeon. It is hard to love a country when you don't feel like it loves you back.

Chris, Partner at More Than Words

The reason why I believe they should raise the age is because many people mess up and it's okay if you do that's life but what's not okay is destroying the rest of your life by putting you away in a locked cages like a dog. I feel as if it would be better to help the people not hurt them. Not to lie to them but to tell them it's going to be okay and make them feel as if they are part of something bigger than just a number.

Emilia, More Than Words

I truly believe that everyone deserves a second chance, and kids should get help. They should not have their entire lives ruined based on bad decisions they made when they were young.

We need you to pass the Raise the Age law. This will affect the future of so many youths. The livelihood of so many people are at stake. I know you want to make the world a better place for your children, grandchildren, nieces, and nephews. This is how.



Mako, Partner at More Than Words

I feel like raising the age at which one can be tried and incarcerated as an adult to at least 20 is a matter of common sense. It's pretty widely known that the human brain isn't finished developing until around the age of 25, so why are we treating young adults as though their brains are fully developed?

Why can someone be tried as an adult for a crime before they can legally drink or smoke? Why does our justice system feel the need to antagonize us from such a young age instead of trying to provide us with support, especially our Black and Brown youth? A person's entire livelihood does not need to get destroyed for them to learn - they need guidance and support for that to happen. We need to step back, take a look at the whole system, and start to rebuild it.