

**TESTIMONY OF ABBY ANDERSON  
SENIOR POLICY ASSOCIATE  
CONNECTICUT JUVENILE JUSTICE ALLIANCE**

**PUBLIC HEARING  
JUDICIARY COMMITTEE  
APRIL 4, 2007**

**H.B. NO. 6285  
AN ACT CONCERNING THE AGE OF A CHILD  
WITH RESPECT TO JUVENILE COURT JURISDICTION**

We all have a right to live, work and raise our children in a safe community. That's one of the reasons why so many people across Connecticut are supporting the Raise the Age Campaign to return non-violent minors to the juvenile justice system. Connecticut is one of only three states in the nation that treats all 16 and 17 year olds as adults. The rationale for this policy is that it will deter crime. I have yet, however, to see anyone present a shred of evidence that it does. In reality, adultification encourages crime.

Northeastern University researcher Donna Bishop studied juveniles transferred to adult court in Florida and compared them to those who remained in the juvenile system. The study was large (2,738 subjects) and rigorous. She found that those who had gone through the adult system were more likely to reoffend at two years and six years after their release. They also reoffended earlier than their peers and were more likely to escalate to violent crime.

Bishop spent thousands of hours interviewing kids in the adult system and found that they "spent much of their time talking to more skilled and experienced offenders, who taught them new techniques of committing crime and avoiding detection."

This research bears out what any parent with common sense might predict. Take a 16 year old on the wrong track and apply education, mental health services and addiction services, and you greatly increase the chance he'll get on the right track. Take the same 16 year old, give him none of those services, but expose him to hardened adult criminals, and you greatly increase the chance that he'll emerge a dangerous young man.

Our juvenile justice system is designed on the principle that kids are different from adults. Their habits and their character are still developing, making adolescence a more conducive time to try rehabilitation than adulthood. The juvenile system, therefore, provides more educational and counseling services to promote rehabilitation, which is in the best interest of the entire community. The adult system, however, emphasizes punishment over rehabilitation. In a very real way, when we send children to adult prisons we are saying, "We have given up on you."

Our current system creates career criminals who will be a danger to our communities and a draw on our law enforcement resources for decades. The important thing to remember with 16 and 17 year olds is that, no matter how harshly we treat them, the overwhelming likelihood is that they will live among us for many years after their prison sentences. What we do now can help determine whether they will be assets or dangers to our communities. Doesn't it make sense to invest in these kids now so that they can grow up to be taxpayers rather than recurrent inmates living at taxpayer expense? Vanderbilt professor Mark A. Cohen found that preventing a teen from adopting an adult life of crime could save the country between \$1.7 and \$2.3 million over a lifetime. We cannot afford to wait any longer to raise the age.

Do not misunderstand: I would not for a moment suggest that we should not hold minors responsible for their crimes simply because of their youth. In fact, my organization, the Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance, supports models that call for offenders to make restitution to victims of crime. By all means, hold juveniles accountable, but hold them accountable in settings that will help them correct their behavior rather than exacerbate it.

Most juveniles enter the system before they have committed serious crimes. More than 70 percent of the 16 and 17 year olds that our state prosecutes as adults are accused of minor, non-violent crimes. This is clearly a golden opportunity to intercede before their delinquency progresses. The small minority of youths who commit serious crimes, A and B felonies, would continue to be treated as adults under legislation currently before the General Assembly.

It is important to remember that we are only talking about making this change for non-violent kids. Much of the support for treating teens as adults comes from fears of "super predators." Princeton University professor John J. DiIulo coined that phrase to describe a new breed of highly violent juveniles he saw on the horizon. The super predators never materialized. Now DiIulo admits that the results have been tragic. He told the *New York Times*: "Most juvenile offenders are not guilty of repeated or random acts of serious violence. Most kids who get into serious trouble with the law need adult guidance. And they won't find suitable role models in prison. Jailing youths with adult felons under Spartan conditions will merely produce more street gladiators."

DiIulo was responsible enough to look at the facts and reevaluate. So are the people of Connecticut. The "Raise the Age" bill before the General Assembly would return non-violent 16 and 17 year olds to the juvenile system. Connecticut is one of only three states in the nation that automatically treats these kids as adults. There are movements in the other two states, North Carolina and New York, to make the change as well. Increasingly citizens there are realizing the social and financial cost of putting children in the adult system.

Dr. Peter Greenwood, founder of RAND Institute Criminal Justice Program and author of [Changing Lives: Delinquency Prevention as Crime Control Policy](#), addressed the Judiciary, Appropriations, and Select Committee on Children in early March on the cost-effectiveness and efficiency of treating 16 and 17 year olds as juveniles.

Dr. Greenwood collected data on the costs and taxpayer benefits of varied evidence-based programs for juveniles and found that “several pay for themselves, many times over, in reduced corrections costs.” Multi-systemic therapy, which costs around five thousand dollars per youth, overtime actually saves taxpayers thirty-five thousand dollars, because the youth is getting the treatment he needs and staying out of prison.

The bill is drawing support from all quarters of our state: suburban and urban, Republican and Democrat. This is gratifying to see. I believe it is happening because this issue touches on values that are common to all of us: fairness and concern about the safety of our families.