

WHY WE CHOSE THIS TOPIC

Emerging adults (ages 18-25) who break the law have the potential to lead safe and productive lives. Helping them do so requires an understanding of the role of crime in an emerging adult's life and the value of positive, healthy social connections for getting them back on track. We see promising practices in the juvenile system that could be applied to emerging adults.

WHAT'S HAPPENING IN WISCONSIN?

The Division of Juvenile Corrections has made great efforts to address the unmet needs of juvenile offenders and help them successfully reintegrate back into their communities. These efforts include:

Ensuring that young people have promising community connections upon release

Striving to keep young people closer to their communities while in detention

Facilitating virtual and in-person family visits

Approaches like this could also be useful in working with the older teens and young people in Wisconsin's adult correctional system

Utilizing trauma-informed approaches

Use of Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT) and other best practices



WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

- ▶ As of 2017, emerging adults represented 10% of the population and 21% of incarcerated individuals.¹

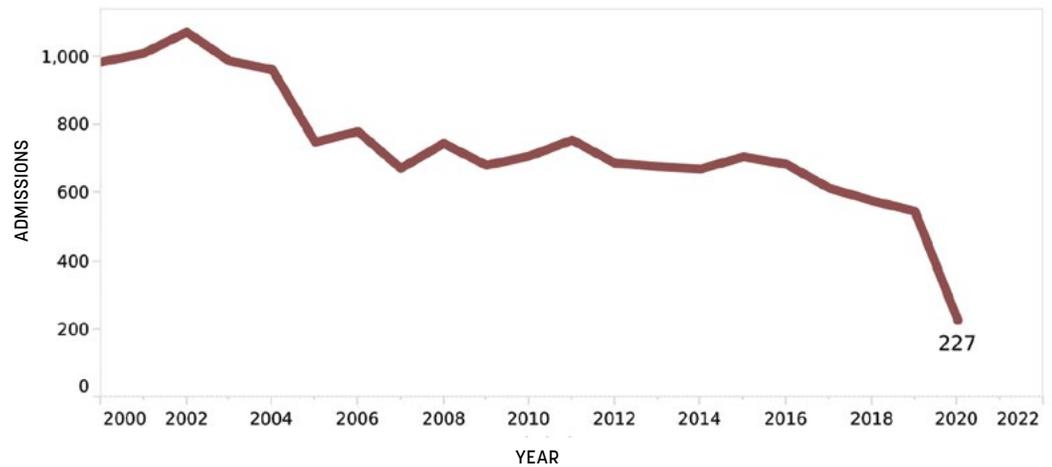


- ▶ Brain development occurs up to age 26 and still places emerging adults (18-25) at risk of impulsive behavior and susceptibility to peer pressure, particularly if their early years have been traumatic or they have unmet mental health needs.
- ▶ Emerging adults are more likely than older people to engage in crime, but tend to age out of criminal activity by about age 25 as their ability to control their emotions and actions improves. **Crime by emerging adults tends to reflect a temporary life stage rather than a long-term criminal tendency.**²
- ▶ **Connections to family, community, and work opportunities are key** to helping emerging adult offenders get on track to success and stability.³

THE RIGHT DIRECTION

Prison populations, including incarcerated emerging adults, are declining. Both in Wisconsin and nationally, the number of people in prison, especially juveniles, has been decreasing over time.⁴ The graph at right shows trends in Wisconsin's emerging adult prison admissions (ages 18-24).⁵

WISCONSIN NEW PRISON ADMISSIONS BY YEAR FOR EMERGING ADULTS, 2000-2020



WHAT WE CAN DO

➔ POLICYMAKERS

- Use “emerging adults” as a category in Wisconsin’s correctional reporting systems to better track the needs, risks, and services offered to this age group.
- Replace the outdated Serious Juvenile Offender Program (SJO) with a blended juvenile/adult sentencing model using a research-based statutory structure.
- Eliminate automatic adult court jurisdiction for any minor.
- Ensure all minors are held in juvenile facilities until they reach the age of 18.
- Apply some of the practices used for juvenile offenders to the emerging adult population.

➔ COMMUNITIES

- Assist emerging adults with re-entry by offering programs and incentives to help them continue their education and professional skills.
- Start a “Ban the Box” initiative with local employers to ensure individuals with a criminal background are not discriminated against in their employment journey.
- Create spaces and opportunities for families to remain connected during incarceration of emerging adults. Through transportation and structured activities, parents, partners, and young children can remain connected to their loved ones despite justice system involvement.

REFERENCES:

¹Frank, Alex (February 2017). “Why Reimagining Prison for Young Adults Matters.” The Vera Institute of Justice’s Think Justice Blog. https://www.vera.org/blog/why-reimagining-prison-for-young-adults-matters?_sm_au=iVVPtTq11J3Q64jMBLQtvK7BJGKjp#:-:text=Young%20people%20ages%2018%20to,compared%20to%20their%20white%20peers.

²This point and the first bullet point are both covered in Gupta-Kagan, Josh. (2018). The intersection between young adult sentencing and mass incarceration. Wis. Law Review, 669. https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2206&context=law_facpub&_sm_au=iVVPtTq11J3Q64jMBLQtvK7BJGKjp

³See e.g. Johnson, W. L., Giordano, P. C., Manning, W. D., & Longmore, M. A. (2011). Parent-child relations and offending during young adulthood. Journal of youth and adolescence, 40(7), 786-799. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-010-9591-9>.

⁴Gramlich, John. (August 2021). “America’s incarceration rate falls to lowest level since 1995.” Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/08/16/americas-incarceration-rate-lowest-since-1995/>. See also Sawyer, Wendy. (December 2019). “Youth Confinement: The Whole Pie 2019.” Prison Policy Initiative. <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/youth2019.html>.

⁵Generated using Wisconsin Department of Corrections’ DAI Admissions to Prison Dashboard using “Trends” tab, new sentences only, and ages “19 and under” and “20 to 24 years”. <https://doc.wi.gov/Pages/DataResearch/PrisonAdmissions.aspx>

