



October 16, 2019

Governor Gretchen Whitmer
P.O. Box 30013
Lansing, Michigan 48909

Dear Governor Whitmer:

Michigan is one of only four states in America that still automatically charges people younger than 18 as adults in criminal court. In an op-ed earlier this year, we urged legislators in Michigan to join the list of states across the country raising the age of criminal responsibility to at least 18 years old. I write again now, in October – National Youth Justice Awareness Month – to ask you to sign these reforms into law.

Under our current system, anything that a 17-year-old does—even stealing candy from a store or getting into a fight at school—will land them in adult court, where they risk getting adult records and spending time in adult jail. This does nothing to make us safer; it actually increases the likelihood of future crime by exposing young, impressionable people to trauma, disrupting their educations and lives and saddling them with criminal records that limit their opportunities for future employment.

As we detailed in April’s op-ed, the numbers associated with charging children as adults are horrifying. Children who spend time in adult prisons are especially likely to be traumatized from physical and sexual abuse at the hands of older inmates and are 36 times more likely to commit suicide than youth charged in the juvenile justice system. Youth prosecuted in adult court are more likely to re-offend than children charged in the juvenile system and, when they do re-offend, do so more quickly and more violently than they would otherwise. Should they be convicted, they become borderline unemployable as teenagers with criminal records. Unsurprisingly, youth of color are particularly harmed by these charging practices: young people of color make up only 23% of the 17-year-old population in the state but make up 53% of 17-year-olds entering Michigan’s state corrective system.

The practice of charging children as adults in criminal court is not consistent with what we now know about adolescent brain development. It is a relic of a racialized and repudiated approach to crime that labels children “superpredators” to be feared and incarcerated rather than young people to be nurtured, taught and corrected when they do wrong so that they can grow into healthy adults who contribute positively to society. Indeed, the reason that the juvenile justice system exists is because children are not merely small adults—they are different and should be treated differently. They are less culpable for misbehavior than adults and are more amenable to change because their brains are still developing. Charging them as adults ignores that and basically writes them off, condemning them to an increased likelihood of future crime for youthful mistakes.

Since 2016, five states, Louisiana, South Carolina, New York, North Carolina and Missouri, have passed laws raising the age of juvenile court jurisdiction to 18 years old. Even that is too low—children’s brains are developing until about 25 and Vermont has plans to include youth up to 20 in juvenile court—but increasing the age of adult jurisdiction to 18 is a no-brainer as a first step toward making our criminal justice system more fair and just for all Michiganders. I write to encourage you to commemorate National Youth Justice Awareness Month by raising the age of juvenile court jurisdiction in Michigan to 18.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Anquan Boldin', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Anquan Boldin
Players Coalition Co-founder
Former NFL Wide Receiver
2015 Walter Payton Man of Year