

STATEMENT

**By Liz Ryan, Former Administrator, Office of Juvenile Justice & Delinquency
Prevention (OJJDP), US Department of Justice
Before the Vermont Senate Judiciary Committee
March 21, 2025**

Thank you Senate Judiciary Committee members for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Liz Ryan and I am testifying in strong support of implementing Vermont's Raise the Age law for 19 year olds and I urge that you remove the pause on H.R. 2 from Raise the Age.

I've worked in the juvenile justice field for more than 25 years. Most recently I served as the Administrator of the Office of Juvenile Justice & Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), following appointment by President Biden, where I served for nearly three years.

OJJDP was established in 1974 under the Juvenile Justice & Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDP Act) to provide national leadership on juvenile justice. OJJDP is the only federal agency that focuses exclusively on youth who are at risk or involved with the juvenile justice system. The agency provides over \$400 million a year to state and local governments, tribal governments, and community-based organizations to prevent and reduce juvenile delinquency. OJJDP provides training and technical assistance to the field as well as model program information, research, policy analysis and guidance.

In my role as OJJDP Administrator, I set national priorities for the office to (1) Treat children as children; (2) Service children at home with their families in their communities; (3) Open up opportunities for justice-involved youth; (4) Center directly impacted youth in all aspects of juvenile justice programs, advocacy, and reform; and (5) Promote equity and fairness.

As Administrator, I supported efforts to reduce the prosecution of youth in adult criminal courts and to reduce the overall incarceration of young people. States are making tremendous progress on these efforts. Vermont is a leader in this area.

Youth and young adults should be handled in family court, rather than adult criminal court. The research is clear on this. The research on the adolescent brain shows that teens and young adults are still maturing into their mid-20's. They have great capacity for change and should be offered support to do so.

Also, the research tells us a great deal about what works to help youth and young adults grow and thrive, and we need to continue to invest in those strategies, rather than the ones we know don't work to promote public safety, such as criminalization in adult court.

Strategies that should be invested in focus on (1) Strengthening protective factors such as providing opportunities for education, employment and mentorship; and (2) Addressing risk factors such as poverty and lack of supervision.

The research underscores that we should not unnecessarily criminalize behavior that can be handled in a more effective way in family court.

Vermont's Raise the Age law is a smart on crime approach that is fiscally responsible, promotes public safety, and supports rather than harms young people by investing in their rehabilitation rather than their incapacitation.

Research shows that most young people, during their teenage years, engage in delinquent behavior, and that most young people age out of it.

It is critical to support young people in aging out of delinquent behavior rather than taking actions that would increase the likelihood that youth will reoffend. Numerous studies have shown that prosecution in adult criminal court for youth and young adults substantially increases the likelihood that they will reoffend.

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in today's hearing.