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JJPOC Monthly Meeting Agenda

Date: January 22nd, 2026

Time: 2:00 – 4:00 PM

Location: LOB Room 2C & Via Zoom

Viewing Options [YouTube](#) or [CT-N](#)

Welcome and Introductions

Representative Toni Walker
Undersecretary Daniel Karpowitz

TYJI Administrative Updates

Erika Nowakowski, TYJI

Vote Level Setting

Paul Klee, TYJI

Vote on Transportation Recommendation
–Education Workgroup

Amy Vatner
Representative Maryam Khan
Oluwaseyi Oluborode

Vote on Truancy Recommendation –
Education Workgroup

Amy Vatner
Representative Maryam Khan
Charles Hewes

Vote on Emerging Adult “Parole”
Recommendation – Community Expertise
Workgroup (CEW)

Elizabeth Hinton
Kadeem Roberts
Stella Rose
Deivone Tanksley

Next Meeting: February 19, 2026



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Juvenile Justice Policy and Oversight Committee

January 22nd, 2025

2:00 – 3:30 PM

Meeting Facilitation

Mute on Zoom

- Participants must remain muted on Zoom unless speaking

Hand Raising

- Virtual attendees should use the Hand Raise Feature on Zoom for questions and comments

Questions at the End

- Hold questions and comments until the presenters have finished speaking

JJPOC only

- Only JJPOC members may ask questions and make comments

Recording

- This meeting is being recorded

Agenda

Welcome and Introductions

Toni Walker, Connecticut State Representative
Daniel Karpowitz, Undersecretary, Office of Policy and Management

TYJI Administrative Updates

Erika Nowakowski, TYJI, University of New Haven

JJPOC Vote Level Setting

Paul Klee, TYJI, University of New Haven

**Vote on Transportation Recommendation –
Education Workgroup**

Amy Vatner, Yale Child Study Center
Maryam Khan, Connecticut State Representative
Oluwaseyi Oluborode, Student, University High School

**Vote on Truancy Recommendation –
Education Workgroup**

Amy Vatner, Yale Child Study Center
Maryam Khan, Connecticut State Representative
Charles Hewes, Deputy Commissioner, Connecticut State Department of Education

**Vote on Emerging Adult "Parole"
Recommendation –
Community Expertise Workgroup (CEW)**

Elizabeth Hinton, Yale Institute on Incarceration & Public Safety
Kadeem Roberts, Connecticut State Representative
Stella Rose, Center for Children's Advocacy
Deivone Tanksley, CT MLK Legacies

Administrative Updates

Workgroup/Subgroup Upcoming Meeting Dates

Workgroup/Subgroup:	Meeting Date:	Agenda Items:
Juvenile Justice Policy and Oversight Committee	February 19th, 2026, 2:00 – 4:00 PM (In-Person & Zoom)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• JJPOC Workgroup 2026 Workplans
Education Workgroup	March 23rd, 2026, 2:00 – 3:30 PM (Zoom)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• TBD
Community Expertise Workgroup	February 3rd, 2026, 11:00 – 3:00 PM (In Person)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Legislative Process Training• Storytelling Training
Cross Agency Data Sharing/RED Workgroup	February 9th, 2026, 11:00 – 12:30 PM (Zoom)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• OPM, DAPA Crossover Youth Update• Juvenile Justice Equity Dashboard 2.0 discussion

Workgroup/Subgroup Upcoming Meeting Dates

Workgroup/Subgroup:	Meeting Date:	Agenda Items:
Diversion Workgroup	February 17th, 2:00 – 3:30 PM (Zoom)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reporting Metrics for JRB's, DCF• RFP diversion supplement, DCF• POSTC Policy Adoption• Youth Police Training
Incarceration Workgroup	February 9th or 23rd (TBD by workgroup), 2026, 1:00 – 2:30 PM (Zoom)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Conditions of Confinement Update• Gender Responsive Update
<p>Direct any Questions to the following Tow Youth Justice Institute Staff:</p> <p>Erika Nowakowski: enowakowski@newhaven.edu</p> <p>Namandje Wali nwali@newhaven.edu</p> <p>Paul Klee: pklee@newhaven.edu</p> <p>Andrew Zhebrak: azhebrak@newhaven.edu</p>		

JJPOC Education Workgroup



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Proposed Draft Transportation Recommendation

Problem Statement

Connecticut law recognizes student transportation as a required school accommodation, yet urban districts often deny high school bus access to students living within a two-mile radius, despite many having to traverse unsafe neighborhoods, a policy that disproportionately harms under-resourced communities and contributes to absenteeism and juvenile justice involvement.

Providing free, universal access to public transportation for students would improve attendance, reduce disconnection and delinquency, and promote equitable access to educational and community opportunities.



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Proposed Draft Transportation Recommendation

Response to Potential Objections

Testimony on prior legislation raised several implementation concerns, including program costs, potential service impacts, coordination across independent transit districts, and compliance with federal regulations.

Each of these challenges, however, has clear solutions: focusing on high school students in under-resourced districts limits costs and revenue impact, prior statewide programs demonstrate that coordinated implementation is feasible, and existing federal processes provide a clear pathway for introducing new fare categories.

By addressing these considerations proactively, Connecticut can remove a critical transportation barrier, expand educational access, and support student engagement, attendance, and long-term success.



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Proposed Draft Transportation Recommendation

Factors for Eligibility

Districts are eligible for this program only if they exceed the statewide average for chronic absenteeism and for student eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch and have access to public transportation during the two hours before school and the four hours after school.

Developing a full index requires substantial data work but may strengthen credibility with policymakers and DOT. SB 1243's broad scope previously raised DOT concerns about fiscal impact.

Narrowing eligibility to students (which only comprise of 8% of transit users) and providing a clear, data-driven framework may reduce opposition. The proposed program would carry a smaller fiscal note than SB 1243's estimated \$3 million.

JJPOC Transportation Recommendation Vote



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Proposed Draft Truancy Recommendation

Problem Statement

Despite recent reforms removing truancy from juvenile court, Connecticut's statutes still criminalize school absence and rely on the outdated concept of "truancy," creating confusion and duplicative tracking alongside chronic absenteeism.

This framework can inadvertently stigmatize students and fails to fully emphasize absenteeism as a wellbeing and support issue rather than a criminal matter.



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Proposed Draft Truancy Recommendation

Solution

Connecticut should eliminate the term “truancy” from state statutes and fully shift the focus to addressing chronic absenteeism as a matter of student wellbeing.

Strengthening community-based diversion systems, expanding programs like LEAP, and connecting families to supportive services would provide targeted interventions for students at risk of disengagement.

This approach emphasizes prevention over punishment, reduces stigma, and ensures that young people receive the resources and support needed to stay in school and succeed.

JJPOC Truancy Recommendation Vote

JJPOC Community Expertise Workgroup



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Proposed Draft CEW Recommendation

Solution

Amend C.G.S. § 54-125a(g) to repeal the October 1, 2005, qualifying sentencing date. This ensures that all individuals who committed crimes while under age 21 are eligible for parole review based on their age at the time of the offense and their demonstrated rehabilitation, regardless of the calendar date of their sentencing.

Develop a comprehensive plan for the responsible expansion of emerging adult protections up to age 26 in concert with representatives from the Judicial Branch, Board of Pardons and Paroles (BOPP), the Department of Correction (DOC), the Office of Victim Services (OVS), the Office of the Chief Public Defender, the Division of Criminal Justice, as well as directly impacted representatives and community stakeholders.

The working group shall develop a detailed framework to ensure victims are fully supported, informed, and engaged in the parole review process for emerging adults, without compromising the integrity of the review.



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Proposed Draft CEW Recommendation

Solution

Develop recommendations for statutory amendments to C.G.S. § 54-91g, requiring courts to consider "Miller" factors (brain science, maturity, capacity for change) at the time of sentencing for all defendants under age 26 facing serious felony charges, ensuring upstream alignment with the parole reforms.

Develop a detailed framework for implementing a rebuttable presumption of suitability for parole release for eligible emerging adults.

Conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the implementation and outcomes of existing statutes expanding parole eligibility for individuals under age 21 (pursuant to P.A. 23-169).

JJPOC Community Expertise Workgroup Vote

2026 PATHWAYS TO SUCCESS

TRAILBLAZERS AND INNOVATORS IN YOUTH JUSTICE



University of New Haven

SAVE THE DATE

OCT. 21, 2026

CONNECTICUT
CONVENTION CENTER

100 COLUMBUS BLVD
HARTFORD, CT 06103

INTERESTED IN PRESENTING?
SCAN CODE TO SUBMIT A PROPOSAL.



represented emerging concepts rather than finalized policy proposals. The intent was to present what the work groups had been considering, outline preliminary ideas, and invite feedback, guidance, and direction from committee members.

That feedback would then inform subsequent revisions and deeper analysis within the work groups before any formal recommendations were advanced.

During the meeting, a member of the committee shared a deeply personal account to contextualize the urgency of proposed legislative changes. The speaker described advocating for reform after a close associate received a lengthy prison sentence as a juvenile, serving more than a decade of incarceration and remaining imprisoned at the time of the discussion. Although prior legislation had been passed addressing similar issues, the individual explained that the law did not apply retroactively due to specific eligibility dates and age thresholds. As a result, the individual directly affected by the case was excluded from relief under the statute.

The speaker emphasized that subsequent research and testimony had further clarified the developmental realities of youth and young adults. Medical professionals and researchers have consistently testified that brain development, particularly for males, continues well into the mid-twenties, with full maturation often occurring around ages twenty-five or twenty-six. This scientific understanding, the speaker argued, has not been adequately reflected in sentencing frameworks or correctional policies. The disconnect between legal standards and developmental science was described as a continuing failure that has significant consequences for young people, families, and communities.

The speaker further stressed that the importance of the proposed legislation extended beyond constitutional considerations and had direct implications for the state as a whole. Attention was drawn to persistent racial disparities within the criminal justice system. Despite representing a relatively small percentage of the state's overall population, Black and Latino individuals were described as disproportionately represented within the incarcerated population. This disparity was characterized as both illogical and unjust, prompting a call for systemic reevaluation of how youth are treated at every stage of the justice process.

The individual noted personal motivation for prioritizing the legislation, explaining that lived experience shaped both advocacy and commitment. The speaker described formative experiences involving childhood exposure to violence, loss, and incarceration. It was shared that during adolescence, one close friend was killed and another close friend was responsible for that death, with all individuals involved being juveniles at the time. These events were described as pivotal, influencing both life trajectory and entry into public service. The speaker framed this experience as



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central to understanding why certain communities are overrepresented in correctional institutions and why early intervention, resources, and support are often absent.

The speaker emphasized that many young people facing incarceration come from environments lacking adequate resources, stability, and opportunity. While acknowledging personal survival and eventual success, the speaker described this outcome as the exception rather than the rule. Survival was characterized as a matter of circumstance and fortune, rather than a reflection of systemic effectiveness. This framing reinforced the argument that policy reform must address structural inequities rather than relying on individual resilience alone. The committee was thanked for providing space for the presentation and discussion. Gratitude was also expressed for allowing members of the advocacy team to participate and share their perspectives. The speaker reiterated that the purpose of the presentation was to seek support during the upcoming legislative session, acknowledging the compressed timeline and accelerated pace of the short session.

Members were reminded that the session would begin in early February and move quickly into March, requiring immediate engagement and coordinated effort. The advocacy team was described as having led sustained organizing efforts across the state, engaging communities from Stamford through Hartford. These efforts included recurring outreach, public forums, and informational sessions designed to educate residents and stakeholders about the proposed legislation. The team's work was characterized as consistent, statewide, and community-centered, reflecting a commitment to building awareness and momentum around the issue. The remarks concluded with a call for collective responsibility and engagement. The speaker emphasized that advancing the legislation would require broad participation, collaboration, and sustained attention. The issue was framed not only as a matter of policy, but as a moral imperative rooted in lived experience, scientific understanding, and the pursuit of equity within the juvenile justice system.

The discussion returned to the substance of the bill itself and the broader trajectory of reform efforts underway. Reference was made to prior legislative success achieved during the previous session, specifically the passage of a bill that prohibited the use of handcuffs on children under the age of fourteen. That effort was described as a major priority and a foundational step toward rethinking how the system treats young people. The passage of that legislation was characterized as evidence that sustained focus and determination can lead to meaningful change, and it was suggested that the current proposal carries similar potential significance.



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Acknowledgment was given to senior leadership within the committee for providing guidance, encouragement, and clarity around process, particularly in ensuring that advocates and impacted voices were fully brought into the conversation. This support was described as essential in transforming individual urgency into collective legislative action.

The speaker then broadened the discussion to the lived consequences of system involvement following incarceration. Concern was raised about the reality faced by individuals reentering society with minimal preparation and support. It was argued that people are often expected to reintegrate successfully despite having been deprived of tools, resources, and opportunities from the outset. This expectation was framed as fundamentally unfair, particularly when individuals are asked to navigate employment, housing, and supervision requirements immediately upon release.

Attention was drawn to the experience of release itself, which was described not as a moment of freedom, but as an immediate transition into another form of control. Individuals are released carrying the weight of parole conditions, felony records, ongoing supervision, and unresolved trauma. This accumulation of restrictions and psychological burdens was described as a continuation of confinement rather than a genuine opportunity for restoration. The emotional and mental impact of this experience was characterized as deeper and more enduring than physical incarceration alone.

The speaker reflected on experiences of confinement during childhood, emphasizing the severity of placing very young children in detention environments. Description was provided of small, confined cells comparable in size to a bathroom, where children as young as ten and eleven years old were held. These experiences were cited as emblematic of a system that prioritizes punishment over understanding, particularly for children who lack the developmental capacity to process trauma or advocate for themselves.

It was emphasized that while broader policy discussions often focus on data and outcomes, the human reality of these experiences can be lost if decision-makers are not directly connected to them. The speaker urged the committee to move beyond formal titles and institutional roles when engaging with this issue and instead view affected youth through relational and familial lenses. Members were encouraged to imagine these children as their own grandchildren, nieces, nephews, siblings, or children, arguing that such perspective shifts fundamentally change how policy choices are weighed.



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The remarks clarified that the intent was not to seek sympathy or pity. Acknowledgment was made that hardship is a universal experience and that many individuals face challenges. Rather, the focus was placed squarely on examining the structure and persistence of systems that continue to produce harm and inequity.

The speaker challenged common assumptions about youth violence, emphasizing that many young people involved in the justice system are not acting out of malicious intent toward others, but are responding to accumulated trauma, instability, and intergenerational harm. It was noted that much of the violence experienced within these communities is inward-facing, reflecting self-destruction rather than predatory behavior. This reality was described as the product of long-standing exposure to violence, neglect, and systemic failure passed down across generations.

Within this context, the parole-focused proposal was framed as a starting point rather than a comprehensive solution. While acknowledging that the bill would not address every case or every individual impacted by the system, it was argued that it would create meaningful relief for a substantial number of people. The importance of beginning reform somewhere, rather than waiting for a perfect solution, was emphasized as a necessary step toward broader transformation.

Before transitioning the floor to another speaker, the individual highlighted the importance of integrating both empirical data and lived experience into policy development. It was argued that data provides essential insight into the scale and patterns of harm within the system, while lived experience explains the underlying causes and day-to-day realities that statistics alone cannot capture. Neither approach, it was stated, is sufficient in isolation.

The remarks cautioned that policies built solely on data risk overlooking the human conditions that lead to failure after release, including trauma, lack of support, and systemic barriers. Conversely, reliance on lived experience alone was described as insufficient to secure the institutional backing, resources, and accountability necessary for sustainable reform. The integration of both was presented as critical to crafting policy that is effective, humane, and durable.

Transportation Recommendation

The group shifted to discussing the Education Recommendation associated with the proposed pilot program for free transportation within several school districts. The conversation focused on how such a program could be structured in a fiscally responsible way while addressing persistent barriers to school attendance, equity,

and access. Members expressed strong interest in the concept, noting that elements of the proposal had already been contemplated or partially funded in prior budget discussions. However, the primary concern raised was the potential for duplicative transportation costs if the program were not carefully integrated with existing statutory requirements governing school transportation.

A central issue identified was the current legislative mandate requiring school districts to provide a bus seat for every eligible student. Under existing law, districts are obligated to maintain comprehensive bus coverage regardless of whether students utilize alternative transportation options. Members cautioned that introducing publicly funded transit passes or free access to municipal transportation systems without adjusting this requirement could result in districts effectively paying twice for student transportation—once through traditional school bus contracts and again through contributions to public transit systems. This was described as a significant pressure point for Board of Education budgets, many of which already allocate substantial resources to transportation.

Despite these concerns, participants acknowledged that public transportation offers students greater flexibility and autonomy compared to rigid school bus schedules. Access to municipal transit can allow students to travel more efficiently, attend school consistently, and participate in extracurricular or after-school programming. The discussion emphasized that these benefits should not be dismissed, but rather leveraged through intentional policy design. The recommendation was framed not as an addition layered on top of existing systems, but as an opportunity to rethink how transportation resources are allocated and coordinated.

Members stressed that any successful pilot program would need to be paired with legislative changes that allow school districts to reduce traditional transportation expenditures where appropriate. This could involve granting districts flexibility to scale back certain bus routes or seat requirements in areas where public transportation is made freely available and demonstrably reliable for students. Without such statutory alignment, districts would remain bound by mandates that prevent them from realizing potential cost savings, undermining the economic rationale of the pilot.

From a budgetary standpoint, the recommendation was characterized as potentially more economical if properly structured. By partnering school districts with municipal or regional transit authorities, the state could create a system in which transportation dollars are used more efficiently, serving both students and the broader community. Participants emphasized the importance of partnership over



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duplication, repeatedly underscoring that the goal was not to build parallel systems but to integrate existing ones in a way that reduces redundancy.

The discussion then broadened to address the real-world context driving the need for such a recommendation. Members noted that in many towns, schools have been closed or consolidated without adequate consideration of transportation impacts. As neighborhood schools disappear, students are increasingly required to travel across town or even across district lines to attend school. This has led to longer commute times, increased reliance on transportation, and declining attendance rates in some schools now serving students from more dispersed areas.

Attendance challenges were identified as a direct consequence of these structural decisions. When students must wake extremely early to catch buses—sometimes well before sunrise—tardiness and absenteeism increase. This burden falls most heavily on families with limited flexibility, particularly those where parents leave for work early and older children are responsible for managing morning routines for younger siblings. In such households, transportation logistics can directly interfere with consistent school attendance.

Equity considerations were central to the discussion of the recommendation. Members highlighted disparities based on income and zip code, noting that students from more affluent households often have access to private transportation options that mitigate these challenges. In contrast, students from lower-income families are more dependent on public systems and therefore more vulnerable to disruptions or inefficiencies. Early pickup times, long commutes, and inflexible schedules were described as contributing to unequal educational experiences that have nothing to do with student effort or ability.

The pilot program recommendation was framed as a way to address these inequities by providing students with reliable, flexible transportation options that better align with their daily realities. Free access to public transportation could reduce financial strain on families, particularly those who currently resort to costly alternatives to ensure their children can get to school on time. It could also support broader participation in after-school programs by making late-afternoon travel more feasible.

Importantly, members emphasized that transportation should be treated as a core component of educational access rather than a peripheral operational issue. Decisions about school closures, district boundaries, and programming all intersect with transportation capacity. The recommendation called for a more holistic



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approach, in which transportation planning is integrated into education policy decisions from the outset.

Overall, the discussion framed the Education Recommendation as both a policy opportunity and a structural challenge. Participants expressed general support for the concept of free transportation within select districts, provided it is implemented through coordinated partnerships and accompanied by legislative adjustments that allow districts to reduce redundant costs. The recommendation was positioned as a potential tool for improving attendance, promoting equity, and using public resources more efficiently, while cautioning that its success depends on careful alignment between education law, transportation policy, and budgetary realities.

Participants highlighted the potential benefits to families and students, emphasizing that the program could relieve financial strain on households that currently rely on alternative, costly transportation options, including ride-sharing services, due to early school bus schedules. The initiative was framed as a strategy to improve access to education while simultaneously supporting family budgets. It was noted that some students are unable to attend after-school programs because transportation home is unreliable or unavailable, and providing free transit would directly address this barrier, enhancing participation in extended learning opportunities.

Several participants also explored the importance of examining existing school bus schedules to better align with students' needs. Adjusting pickup times could reduce tardiness and absenteeism, creating a more equitable environment for students whose families may not have the flexibility to manage early morning commutes. The recommendation was viewed not merely as a logistical improvement but as an essential investment in educational access, equity, and student well-being. Members stressed that while the state possesses sufficient funding, careful allocation is required to prioritize student needs and ensure resources are directed to areas that will yield the greatest benefit for children. The discussion underscored the broader principle that while programs frequently prioritize adult services, similar commitment and attention must be extended to children and their educational opportunities.

The conversation also addressed economic considerations, particularly the potential for the pilot program to reduce overall transportation costs if coordinated effectively with existing public transit systems. Participants emphasized the importance of structuring the initiative to avoid redundancy, ensuring that school districts would not be paying twice for transportation services. Partnerships with public transit were highlighted as a practical approach to achieve both flexibility for



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students and fiscal efficiency for districts. This integration could allow students to travel independently and remain engaged in after-school activities, libraries, and other community resources, fostering greater autonomy and responsibility while providing parents with peace of mind regarding safe and reliable transportation.

Finally, the group acknowledged that the discussion was preliminary, introducing the concept and encouraging participants to consider its broader implications. The Education Work Group emphasized that these recommendations are part of an ongoing effort to identify practical, equitable solutions that address attendance, student success, and family support. By integrating free transportation with strategic planning, the pilot program is positioned as a tool to enhance access to education, reduce inequities based on income or location, and support students' holistic development, both during and after the school day.

Truancy Recommendation

The discussion transitioned to the topic of truancy, specifically focusing on the recommendation to remove truancy from state statutes. Truancy is currently defined as a student having four unexcused absences within a single month or ten unexcused absences within an academic year. Historically, efforts have been made to decriminalize truancy and divert affected students away from juvenile court involvement. Despite these initiatives, some statutes remain on the books that impose penalties for truancy, though they are rarely enforced. The term "truancy" itself carries a significant negative connotation, which can inadvertently stigmatize students and their families.

From an operational standpoint, it was noted that tracking absenteeism, and specifically chronic absenteeism, provides a more effective and straightforward measure for schools, families, and policymakers. Chronic absenteeism is typically defined as missing ten percent or more of the total school days in an academic year, allowing schools to monitor patterns and intervene proactively. The Education Work Group emphasized that this metric is more actionable for educators and administrators, as it focuses on addressing consistent gaps in attendance rather than penalizing students for occasional absences.

The Education Work Group intends to collaborate with the Diversion Work Group, the state Department of Education, and the Association of School Superintendents to explore the removal of truancy from state statutes. This collaborative approach is designed to ensure that any revisions are well-informed, operationally feasible, and sensitive to the practical implications for students, schools, and families. The intent



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is to create a system that emphasizes supportive interventions rather than punitive measures while maintaining accountability for consistent attendance.

Questions arose regarding the current consequences for truancy. One participant shared that in the past, students could be subjected to juvenile detention for truancy, highlighting the real-world implications of maintaining punitive statutes. Current consequences were described as varying depending on the district, though precise details were deferred for more in-depth review. It was acknowledged that a detailed examination of definitions, penalties, and practices in other states would provide valuable context and benchmarks for potential legislative revisions. Connecticut is often observed as a model for educational and juvenile policies, and adjustments to truancy laws could influence broader policy trends across the country.

It was emphasized that the current meeting would not resolve all specifics but rather serve as an initial step to spark interest and engagement among stakeholders. The goal is to ensure that participants are aware of the issue, understand the rationale for potential statutory changes, and are encouraged to contribute to future discussions. The importance of cross-agency collaboration was underscored, particularly in relation to updating data-sharing timelines and ensuring alignment across educational and administrative bodies. Adjustments were noted, including correcting dates to reflect the current year and accounting for state holidays.

Moving forward, the Education Work Group plans to convene a focused session to explore the topic of transportation in conjunction with truancy concerns. Feedback provided during the current discussion will be used to conduct deeper analysis, including compiling relevant data and refining recommendations. The intention is to produce concise documentation, such as an A5-sized fact sheet, to summarize key findings and proposed pilot initiatives. These materials are designed to be accessible and actionable, ensuring that stakeholders can quickly understand the core issues, data insights, and policy recommendations.

Additionally, the discussion highlighted the value of incorporating lived experiences alongside quantitative data. By engaging individuals who have personally navigated the education and juvenile systems, the Work Group aims to ensure that policy proposals reflect real-world challenges and solutions. Input from students and families who have directly experienced the consequences of truancy laws will be integrated into the analysis and recommendations. This approach reinforces the commitment to creating equitable, supportive, and effective educational policies while minimizing the risk of unintended punitive consequences for students.



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The process will include careful review and revision of policy language, coordination across agencies, and incorporation of both statistical data and anecdotal evidence. Recommendations developed through this iterative process are intended to guide future legislative sessions, with the goal of presenting a finalized policy package by January 8th. This structured approach ensures that any proposed changes are well-informed, feasible, and aligned with broader educational and juvenile justice objectives, emphasizing prevention, support, and fairness for all students.

Next Meeting:
January 22, 2026
2:00 PM- 4:00 PM



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JUVENILE JUSTICE POLICY AND OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE DRAFT 2026 RECOMMENDATIONS





DRAFT JJPOC 2026 Recommendations in Brief

Recommendation	Draft Legislative Language	Policy/ Legislative Recommendation
<p>JJPOC Education Work Group</p> <p>Recommendation #1</p>	<p>A. It is recommended that the Commissioner of Education, in consultation with the Commissioner of Transportation and the education workgroup of the JJPOC shall develop a plan and recommendations for a two-year pilot grant-in-aid program to provide funding to ten local and regional boards of education for the purpose of purchasing public transportation bus passes for students enrolled in grades nine to twelve, inclusive. Such bus passes shall be valid for use on state-owned or state-controlled public bus transportation services. The plan shall be delivered to the JJPOC by July, 1 2026.</p> <p>B. The plan shall include a local or regional board of education to be eligible to receive a grant pursuant to this section only if the school district served by such board meets all of the following criteria:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. The district has a chronic absenteeism rate for the previous school year that exceeds the statewide average, as determined by the Department of Education;2. The district has a rate of student eligibility for free or reduced-price school lunch that exceeds the statewide average, as determined by the Department of Education;3. The district has access to public transportation services during the two-hour period immediately preceding the start of the regular school day; and	Legislative



	<p>4. The district has access to public transportation services during the four-hour period immediately following the end of the regular school day.</p> <p>C. Notwithstanding the provisions of subsection (b) of this section, and in order to promote regional equity, the Commissioner of Education shall expand eligibility for the pilot program to three non-urban school districts out of the ten selected school districts that are served by established public bus routes, as determined by the Commissioner of Transportation.</p> <p>D. The Department of Education, in consultation with the Education Workgroup of the Juvenile Justice Policy and Oversight Committee, shall develop an index to assess and rank the relative urgency of need for participation in the pilot program established pursuant to this section. Using such index, the department shall select not more than ten school districts to participate in the pilot program prior to the commencement of the previous academic year.</p> <p>E. The plan shall include a fiscal note on the cost per district included in the pilot program.</p> <p>F. A local or regional board of education receiving funds pursuant to this section shall distribute public transportation bus passes to high schools within the district based on demonstrated student demand, as determined by an application. The Department of Education shall create the application by June 30th, 2026, and may prescribe the content and administration of the form.</p>	
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	<p>G. Each high school participating in the pilot program established pursuant to this section shall develop and maintain a data-tracking system to monitor the distribution and usage of public transportation bus passes. Such high school shall submit quarterly reports to the Department of Education, in such form and manner as the department may prescribe, provided any data reported shall be aggregated and de-identified in compliance with applicable state and federal privacy laws.</p> <p>H. The Juvenile Justice Policy and Oversight Committee, in consultation with the Department of Education, shall conduct an evaluation of the pilot program, which shall include:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">a. A quantitative analysis of program outcomes, including, but not limited to, changes in student attendance rates, chronic absenteeism, extracurricular participation, and graduation rates; andb. A qualitative assessment based on interviews with participating students, families, school administrators, and other relevant stakeholders.<ol style="list-style-type: none">i. Such evaluation shall include a comparative analysis of participating school districts and similarly situated nonparticipating school districts. <p>I. Not later than June 30, 2028, the Education Workgroup shall submit a report on the findings of such evaluation, including any recommendations for program continuation, expansion, or</p>	
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	modification, to the Juvenile Justice and Policy Oversight Committee as established by Public Act 14-217, Section 79,	
JJPOC Education Work Group Recommendation #2	1. The Education Workgroup of the JJPOC shall explore the use of the terms “truant” and “truancy” both nationally and in Connecticut and, in consultation with CSDE, DCF, CAPSS, and CAS, develop recommendations by January 1, 2027 for the possible repeal of Connecticut statutes which refer to truants or truancy and the inclusion of appropriate provisions of such repealed statutes in existing Connecticut statutes which address the reduction in absenteeism from school. The recommendations shall include but need not be limited to transition supports for agencies and school districts affected by any recommended repeal or amendment of statutes.	Legislative
JJPOC CEW Work Group Recommendation #1	<p>It is recommended that:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Amend C.G.S. § 54-125a(g) to repeal the October 1, 2005 qualifying sentencing date. This ensures that all individuals who committed crimes while under age 21 are eligible for parole review based on their age at the time of the offense and their demonstrated rehabilitation, regardless of the calendar date of their sentencing.2. Required Planning for Future Expansion (Report Due July 1, 2026) The JJPOC shall convene a working group, including representatives from the Judicial Branch, Board of Pardons and Paroles (BOPP), the Department of Correction (DOC), the Office of Victim Services (OVS), the Office of the Chief Public Defender, the Division of Criminal Justice, as well as directly impacted representatives and	Legislative

	<p>community stakeholders, to develop a comprehensive plan for the responsible expansion of emerging adult protections up to age 26.</p> <p>This plan shall be delivered to the JJPOC by July 1, 2026 with an effective date of October 1, 2027. The plan shall include consideration for:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li data-bbox="600 686 1139 1072">a. Framework for Enhanced Victim Support and Engagement: The working group shall develop a detailed framework to ensure victims are fully supported, informed, and engaged in the parole review process for emerging adults, without compromising the integrity of the review. This framework shall include recommendations for:<li data-bbox="600 1079 1122 1254">b. Statutory changes to mandate enhanced, trauma-informed notification processes that clearly explain the nature of emerging adult reviews.<li data-bbox="600 1260 1122 1396">c. Designated advocates within OVS to provide dedicated, end-to-end support for victims navigating hearings.<li data-bbox="600 1402 1122 1577">d. Processes to ensure victim statements are considered by the Board in a manner consistent with the principles of restorative justice and the overall goals of the policy. <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li data-bbox="551 1579 1139 1888">3. Framework for Sentencing Considerations: The working group shall develop recommendations for statutory amendments to C.G.S. § 54-91g, requiring courts to consider "Miller" factors (brain science, maturity, capacity for change) at the time of sentencing for all defendants under age 26 facing serious felony charges,	
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	<p>ensuring upstream alignment with the parole reforms.</p> <p>4. Framework for Presumptive Release: The working group shall develop a detailed framework for implementing a rebuttable presumption of suitability for parole release for eligible emerging adults. This framework shall specify:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">a. The evidentiary standard required to rebut the presumption (e.g., clear and convincing evidence of current unreasonable risk).b. The specific criteria and risk assessment tools that will be used to evaluate current risk, ensuring they are developmentally appropriate and validated for this population.c. The procedural mechanisms for how the burden shift will function in practice during parole hearings. <p>5. Comprehensive Study to Inform Future Expansion (Due Dec 1, 2026) The JJPOC, shall conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the implementation and outcomes of existing statutes expanding parole eligibility for individuals under age 21 (pursuant to P.A. 23-169).</p> <p>The study shall include, but not be limited to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">a. Parole grant vs. denial rates for the under-21 population since implementation.b. Recidivism outcomes for individuals released under these provisions compared to the general population.c. An analysis of the administrative capacity required by the BOPP to process these reviews.	
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none">d. Recommendations and a projected timeline for the responsible expansion of these protections to emerging adults up to age 26, incorporating findings on brain development and public safety.e. The findings and recommendations shall be delivered to the JJPOC by December 1, 2026 and shall inform the planning for emerging adult protection under Part 2 inclusive of subsections 1-3	
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JJPOC Education Work Group Recommendation #1 Justification

Problem Statement

Embedded within state law, Connecticut requires each local or regional board of education to provide transportation to school-aged children wherever reasonable and desirable, identifying transportation as a necessary “school accommodation” that boards must supply as part of their obligation to the communities they serve. For most urban public-school districts in Connecticut, high school students are only eligible for school bus transportation if they live more than two miles from school, based on the assumption that students can safely walk or otherwise secure transportation within that radius. This standard fails to acknowledge that many youths reside in some of the most dangerous communities in Connecticut and may feel unsafe walking to and from school, regardless of the distance.

When youth can attend school consistently, they have opportunities to build positive interpersonal relationships and engage in structured, pro-social activities, which reduces the risk of delinquent behavior. Improving school attendance rates may be a key causal factor in lowering youth involvement in delinquency. By accessing transportation, attending classes, and participating in supportive extracurricular or community programs, students at risk of disconnection can decrease their likelihood of entering the juvenile justice system altogether.

Earlier this school year, a 13-year-old girl was sexually assaulted while walking to Bassick High School. After the school relocated to the University of Bridgeport campus, the route changed, forcing students to travel through a raised railroad track and an industrial district, an isolated area lacking pedestrian traffic and exposing youth to unnecessary risk. Under Bridgeport ISD’s two-mile walking policy, students living within the radius must walk long distances through unsafe zones without transportation support, disproportionately impacting under-resourced communities. Access to a public bus line



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would have reduced the student's exposure to this high-risk route. Every student deserves a safe commute to school without navigating avoidable dangers.

Urban neighborhoods outside the two-mile radius lack coverage by traditional school bus lines, disproportionately impacting under-resourced communities and contributing to chronic absenteeism and risk for involvement in the juvenile justice system.

CT Transit currently offers youth ages 0–18 a discounted fare of \$1.40. per ride



While insignificant for some families, \$500 is a significant hurdle for families in Connecticut's most economically disadvantaged communities. In Hartford, Bridgeport, Waterbury, and New Haven, roughly one quarter of residents live at or below the poverty line, and approximately one quarter of households lack access to a personal vehicle, compounding transportation barriers for students. Reducing the cost burden would help youth attend school and remain engaged and provide access to extracurricular activities, community centers, social services, jobs, and internships. Ensuring youth mobility is central to addressing disparities in educational access. Students require transportation to academic opportunities, after school programs, internships, jobs, and community activities. Without affordable mobility, many face increased risk of long-term disconnection. The 2024 Disconnected Youth Report highlighted how these trends disproportionately affect under-resourced areas. Providing youth with free, universal access to public transportation is a necessary step toward addressing chronic absenteeism and disconnection in inner city schools, enabling inner city youth to actualize their full social and academic potential.



Recommendation Justification

Providing free transit passes to students produces multiple downstream benefits that positively impact educational outcomes, families, and communities. The most immediate effect is increased attendance and mobility, allowing access to opportunities previously limited by transportation barriers. Expanded access supports enrichment, extracurricular participation, and community engagement such as employment or involvement in youth programs, collectively increasing on-time graduation and post-secondary enrollment while reducing risks associated with chronic absenteeism, including teen pregnancy, criminal activity, and substance abuse. Families benefit from increased disposable income and reduced transportation costs. Over time, these effects can strengthen financial stability and improve neighborhoods. This framework aligns with the social determinants of health model¹, as improving educational access can uplift interconnected domains affecting quality of life.

In 2022, Governor Lamont eliminated bus fares statewide using federal funds to offset pandemic-related challenges. Ridership rose sharply: 52% in Hartford, 37% in New Haven, 28% in Waterbury, and 40% in Stamford.² When fares were reinstated, ridership dropped significantly. These results suggest that removing fares reliably increases ridership, particularly among price-sensitive populations such as youth.

Students in New Haven and Hartford later secured ARPA funding for high school transit passes. Peak usage occurred at 7:00 AM and 3:00 PM on weekdays, indicating students used the passes for school commute. Additional data from student testimony is forthcoming.

Several metropolitan areas across the country instituted similar policies with positive outcomes. Sacramento's "RydeFreeRT" program launched in 2019, enabling all 275,000 K-12 youth within SacRT's service area to access light rail and bus services at no cost. Student ridership rose significantly, with youth becoming one of the most price-impacted groups. UT Austin researchers found significant increases in students using regional transit for commuting and broader community mobility; 41% reported using transit for destinations beyond school. Lower-income youth participated most. However, outreach gaps decreased ridership among Spanish-speaking youth, a factor Connecticut must consider.

Connecticut's climate intensifies the need for accessible transit. Winter temperatures often fall below freezing, and research shows students are 34% more likely to miss school on

¹ <https://odphp.health.gov/healthypeople/priority-areas/social-determinants-health>

² <https://ctmirror.org/2024/06/05/cttransit-free-bus-fare-ridership/>
<https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/deep/air/siprac/2025/october/uhsse-student-bus-ridership-report.pdf?rev=66e464423e3144699ebc8a38b6ee7ea4&hash=4E2A99AC5E92C3A0A675E00C5DAD1EF7>

days below 30°F. Under current policy, students within a two-mile radius, especially those without cars, may walk 40 minutes in freezing temperatures. Eliminating transportation barriers could improve school attendance more than observed in Sacramento.

Response to Potential Objections

Testimony on SB 1243 identified several concerns related to implementing a statewide fare-free transit program. Although the current recommendation is far narrower, limited only to high-school students in qualifying municipalities, the issues raised in earlier testimony still provide useful context.

One concern involved the absence of such a program from the proposed 2026–2027 biennial budget, which raised questions about financial feasibility. Revenue loss was cited as a challenge for both CTtransit services and the twelve independent transit districts, particularly given that earlier fare-free initiatives relied on one-time federal relief funds to cover funding gaps. At the same time, available data indicates that students comprise a relatively small share of transit revenue: youth fares are \$1.40, and riders ages 5–17 make up approximately 6% of daily ridership. A prior OFA estimate suggested that providing free transportation to all youth statewide would cost roughly \$3 million. A program limited to high school students, designed with needs-based eligibility and geographic restrictions, would likely carry substantially lower costs.

Another issue raised was the possibility of service reductions if fare revenue declined. However, only 8% of riders use the bus for school transportation, suggesting that students do not represent a major share of operating revenue. More detailed youth-fare revenue data would allow for a clearer assessment of potential impacts.

The structure of Connecticut's transit network was also noted as a factor. CTtransit is state operated, while twelve additional transit districts function independently with their own fare structures, fare policies, and service contracts. Despite this variation, prior statewide programs such as U-Pass successfully negotiated participation with all districts, indicating that coordinated implementation is possible. Understanding student ridership levels in each district would assist in projecting program costs more accurately.

ADA paratransit requirements are another consideration involved. Federal regulations mandate that paratransit fares be tied to fixed-route fares and that eligible populations receive equivalent benefits. Extending fare-free service to a defined student population could marginally increase demand, though the number of high-school students who qualify for paratransit may be limited.

If adopted in 2025–2026, Connecticut would be the *first* state to ensure all high school aged youth in under-resourced districts can access transit free of charge. While no statewide precedent exists in the US, smaller-scale and temporary programs offer relevant evidence.

By addressing transportation as a foundational equity issue, Connecticut can remove a preventable barrier to educational access and improve outcomes for students most at risk of disconnection. This would open doors to opportunities previously restricted by transportation barriers. Expanded access enables participation in enrichment activities, extracurricular programs, and community engagement such as employment or youth initiatives.

Factors for Eligibility

As Connecticut considers program design, several variables emerge: chronic absenteeism; free/reduced-price lunch eligibility; car-ownership rates; and population density thresholds indicating urban transit availability. These can be used in either a simple pass/fail model or a composite index. Additional variables such as local crime rates, environmental hazards, Title I eligibility, and the prevalence of single-parent households, could strengthen the index.

Developing a full index requires substantial data work but may strengthen credibility with policymakers and DOT. SB 1243's broad scope previously raised DOT concerns about fiscal impact. Narrowing eligibility to students (which only comprise of 8% of transit users) and providing a clear, data-driven framework may reduce opposition. The proposed program would carry a smaller fiscal note than SB 1243's estimated \$3 million.

Conclusion

Allowing students to access public bus lines before and after school hours would increase freedom and opportunity to explore personal interests, build social connections, and participate in academic support, strengthening engagement and graduation likelihood. The State of Connecticut should ensure all high school-aged youth residing in underprivileged districts have free access to public transportation systems including buses, trains, and other qualifying services. Removing cost barriers would remove a key structural barrier to student engagement and opportunity by enabling students to build stronger peer connections, engage in opportunities beyond the classroom, and access resources without transportation serving as a limiting factor.

JJPOC Education Work Group Recommendation #2 Justification

Problem Statement

Through efforts of the Juvenile Justice Policy and Oversight Committee (JJPOC), Public Act 16-147 removed truant youth from juvenile court (effective August 15th, 2017). Despite this major accomplishment, the term "truancy" remains embedded in state statute enabling law enforcement and others to criminalize young people for school absence. The term truancy historically holds a negative, criminally based connotation, given its connection to juvenile



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justice systems and court involvement. Truancy is defined in section 10-198(a) of Connecticut's General Statutes as a child aged five to eighteen who accrues four unexcused absences in one month or ten unexcused absences over the course of a school year.

Chronic Absenteeism is not punitive, rather restorative in the essence that instead of criminalizing young people for absenteeism, the measure of chronic absenteeism is used to prevent future absenteeism and provide and connect young people to community resources that help increase their attendance. Moving the language toward a matter of wellbeing and connecting young people experiencing absenteeism to the community-based diversion system has been found effective in increasing school attendance.

School absence is an issue that the JJPOC and State Department of Education have been evaluating. The process that tracks truancy is the same process that monitors chronic absenteeism. The tracking of truancy is duplicative to that of chronic absenteeism, showing the same trends. The usage of the term truancy no longer has a place in state statute. In addition, the YSB/JRB referral form used by schools will be updated and an enhanced system of response developed by the State Department of Education to re-engage students and get them back to school. These tiered responses include, depending on the level, community-based diversion programs, such as Juvenile Review Boards (JRBs), mental health screenings and treatment, as well as legal intervention.

Chronic Absenteeism in Connecticut

The Connecticut State Department of Education has developed a tiered response system to address absenteeism. The tiered response system is designed to meet students at different levels of absenteeism and provide outreach and support with the goal of keeping young people in school.

Tier one is described as the universal support tier and is designated for all students and focused on building a culture of good attendance to prevent absenteeism before it occurs. Some of the strategies used in tier one are:

- Creating warm, welcoming and culturally responsive school climates,
- Communicating with families about the importance of attendance,
- Recognizing good attendance and
- Monitoring attendance data so intervention can be held in a timely fashion if attendance starts to become an issue.

Tier two focuses on early intervention for at-risk youth, those missing 10 -19 percent of school days. Chronic absenteeism is defined as a student who has missed 10 percent or more of school days, this tier specifically targets students who have just become chronically absent. This tier of absenteeism, defined as chronically absent, triggers higher

levels of communication and relationship building with the student and their families to develop of individualized student attendance improvement plans. This may include

- Phone calls and at home visits,
- Mentorship programming,
- Identifying and addressing health, transportation and housing barriers with community resources and the.

Tier three is designated for severely absent students, those who have missed 20 percent or more of the school year. This tier of intervention is a multi-agency effort of case management that includes health, housing and social services. This tier involves referrals to community-based diversion programs, such as Juvenile Review Boards (JRBs), mental health screenings and treatment, as well as legal intervention.

Truancy Across the United States

States such as Connecticut, New Mexico and Texas have moved away from school absence being viewed as criminal, rather an indication that there are unmet needs of a child and/or their family. The National Center for School Engagement provides guidance around defining truancy, suggesting that truancy should be triggered at the time of any unexcused absence. Connecticut's definition of truancy aligns with that of many other states, that being four absences in one month or ten absences in a school year. There is a slight bit of variation in terms of how many absences trigger truancy from state to state. There are several states that trigger truancy sooner than Connecticut. For example, California and Kentucky label student truant at just three unexcused absences. While there is slight difference in how truancy is triggered from state to state, Connecticut is on the forefront of addressing school absenteeism with the implementation of programs such as LEAP. Public Act 16-147 removing truancy and defiance of school rules from juvenile court established a pathway for prevention, moving away from punishment and labeling school absence as criminal behavior. The next step forward is to eliminate truancy from state statute, in so being the first state to do so.

Conclusion

While Connecticut, New Mexico and Texas have made significant reforms in relation to truancy laws, Connecticut has the potential to be the first state to completely eliminate truancy laws and move on from punitive criminal sanctions for young people and their families. Connecticut has made significant strides by beginning to redefine chronic absenteeism and utilizing the approaches needed to help increase attendance, but more needs to be done. Like Connecticut, New Mexico and Texas have mechanisms in place to track chronic absenteeism, however Connecticut has a community-based diversion system in place to make referrals to services in the community and programs such as LEAP to raise awareness of the importance of being in school.

While we have discussed the benefits of removing the terminology of truancy, the way it is defined and monitored, it is critical to mention how removing the truant label is removing the stigmatization around students who are chronically absent. The term truancy is still viewed by many as criminal behavior and there needs to be more awareness of the importance of seeing a chronically absent child as a person who's in need of support.

JJPOC CEW Work Group Recommendation #1 Justification

Problem Statement: Misalignment with Science & The Consequences

Historically, the American legal system maintained a strict, binary division: an individual transitioned from being a child to a fully responsible adult, typically at age eighteen. This rigid legal line, however, is increasingly at odds with the scientific understanding derived from neurobiology and developmental psychology. This conflict led the U.S. Supreme Court to recognize "children are different" constitutionally, eliminating the harshest criminal penalties for young people.

The constitutional principle prompted action from both the Connecticut legislature and judiciary in 2015.¹ While, the Supreme Court acknowledged, "[t]he qualities that distinguish juveniles from adults do not disappear when an individual turns 18."² The 2015 legislative reforms only applied to youth under the age eighteen ensuring that youth sentenced to more than ten years imprisonment are eligible for parole. This reform also required sentencing judges to consider youth-related mitigating factors at sentencing for class A and B felonies. In 2023, the State expanded early parole consideration from under 18 to under 21—**but only for those who had been sentenced before October 1, 2005.**³ Though both laws brought the State closer to enacting juvenile legislation grounded in fairness, science, and the principle of rehabilitation to achieve desired public safety outcomes, there is still more urgent work to do.

The Arbitrary Cutoff and Two-Tiered Justice

The 2023 reform, while an important first step, has inadvertently created a two-tiered system of justice by hinging eligibility for parole review on an arbitrary October 1, 2005 sentencing date. As a result, 212 individuals who committed offenses as emerging adults are excluded from evidence-based reforms, while others who committed the same crimes at the same age—solely sentenced before that date—remain eligible for review. This cutoff produces an inequitable and irrational divide in the justice system:

- **The Glitch:** Two individuals could have committed the exact same crime at the exact same age. One was sentenced before October 1, 2005, and is eligible for parole



review. The other was sentenced after October 1, 2005, and faces lifelong incarceration without meaningful review.

- **The Inequity:** This cutoff is not based on science, safety, or justice. It is an arbitrary anomaly that disproportionately impacts communities of color.
- 85% of the individuals impacted by this cutoff are Black or Hispanic.
- Connecticut has the second highest Black/white racial disparity in youth incarceration in the nation.
- **De Facto Life Sentences:** Those excluded by the cutoff face what are effectively "De Facto Life Sentences"—lifelong incarceration without review. In many cases, these individuals are incarcerated for periods exceeding the age they were when first jailed, meaning the punishment has literally lasted longer than the life they lived before the crime.

Racial Disparity and Exclusion of Emerging Adults

Adding to the urgency of reform are the significant racial disparities evidenced by the cutoff date and the exclusion of emerging adults under the age of 26 from early parole eligibility. In a state where Black residents represent roughly 10 percent of the general population, and about 42 percent of the incarcerated population, they represent approximately 70 percent of those who are impacted by the arbitrary cutoff date. Together, Black and Latino people represent 90 percent of those impacted. Moreover, there are 450 people total who would be impacted if eligibility was expanded to under 26. Of those, approximately 63 percent are Black and 25 percent are Latino, meaning about 88 percent of those who are incarcerated for crimes they committed before their brain was fully developed are men and women of color, in a state where Black and Latino people are just under 30 percent of the general population.⁵ The existing barrier is both a reflection and a driver of long-standing inequalities in Connecticut—and it sustains one of the most extreme racial disparities in youth incarceration in the nation, second only to New Jersey.⁶ Furthermore, in Connecticut, the rate at which young people are incarcerated varies greatly based on race. Connecticut has the second highest Black/white racial disparity in youth incarceration in the country, with Black juveniles 13.5 times more likely to be incarcerated than white juveniles.⁴ Connecticut's outdated and arbitrary laws, therefore, are exponentially harming families of color.

The Science of Emerging Adulthood

Historically, emerging adults are generally treated as fully mature adults in the eyes of the criminal justice system. However, the “results of this undifferentiated and generic approach have been demonstrably poor, be it in terms of public safety, individual well-being, [and]

cost effectiveness. Emerging adults comprise a disproportionately high percentage of arrests: In the U.S., emerging adults (ages 18 – 24) make up 10% of the U.S. population but 30% of arrests; in Connecticut, emerging adults (ages 18 – 20) comprise 4% of the state's population but 10% of arrests.⁷ As the Supreme Court notes, however, emerging adulthood is a fragile age of opportunity—one where young people are ripe for change, since after full brain development, emerging adults largely tend to age out of criminality.⁸

National Perspective

In *Miller v Alabama*, the Court recognized the idea that the transition to adulthood extends beyond the age of 18 is supported not only by "common sense—on what 'any parent knows'—but also by scientific and social science as well."⁹ Neuroscientific research indicates that the brains of "emerging adults" still exhibit adolescent characteristics.¹⁰ Specifically, brain imaging reveals a "maturity gap": the prefrontal cortex, which governs judgment and planning, develops later than the brain's reward and emotional systems. This developmental imbalance results in a disparity in decision-making. When individuals in this age group are under emotional stress or peer influence (hot cognition), their decisions are often poor. However, in calm circumstances (cold cognition), their decision-making is comparable to that of adults.¹¹

Current law acknowledges emerging adulthood, both by restricting young adults' high-risk behaviors (e.g., firearms, commercial driving, alcohol) and by offering supportive measures (e.g., health care, education, child welfare services). This need for continued support is further reflected in societal and legal norms, such as parents' financial aid, allowing young adults to stay on parental health insurance until 26, claiming students as dependents until 24, and extended child support in some states. These existing provisions collectively demonstrate a legal understanding of the challenges and necessity for continuous support during this period. Following the legal precedents set by the U.S. Supreme Court, it is paramount that the justice system adopts developmentally appropriate responses for emerging adults.

The Supreme Court draws the line for age-appropriate treatment under the law at 18 years old. However, the most recent and accurate studies on brain development show that such logic should be extended to all emerging adults: a young person's brain is not fully developed until the age of 26. For, as a Massachusetts ruling stated: "a child does not go to bed on the eve of her eighteenth birthday and awaken characterized by a lessened 'transient rashness, proclivity for risk, and inability to assess consequences.'"¹⁴ Connecticut has a unique opportunity and is poised to join the growing consensus about crime and young people by modernizing state law to align with best practices ensuring our justice system is equitable and effective.

Other states have already taken such initiative:

1. **California** provides one of the clearest “age-based second look” models, covering people through age 25. Through SB 260 and subsequent expansions, California grants youth parole hearings to emerging adults who committed crimes up to age 25.
2. **Vermont** builds emerging adulthood into its legal framework by treating young people differently based on age and development. The state has successfully implemented youthful offender statutes that extend protections into emerging adulthood, serving as a model for hybrid justice systems.¹⁵
3. **Washington D.C.** uses an age cutoff (under 25) as the trigger for second-look review, even when sentences were not technically mandatory. The "Second Look Amendment Act" allows individuals who committed crimes before age 25 to petition for sentence modification after 15 years.
4. **Illinois** created parole review mechanisms specifically tied to age at offense for individuals under 21, reflecting a legislative recognition that emerging adults warrant developmentally informed review after lengthy sentences.¹⁶
5. **Rhode Island** directly expands “youth offender” eligibility into the early 20s by statute. The Youth Offender Act (“Mario’s Law”) provides relief based on age at offense by covering individuals who committed an offense before their 22nd birthday, offering a strong example of age-based parole eligibility beyond 18.

Connecticut is currently out of step with law and science in three ways: (1) current law arbitrarily impacts certain individuals in the criminal justice system, (2) the law remains misaligned with the most up-to-date science regarding age and developing brains, and (3) the law fails to prioritize both rehabilitation and public safety through strictly structured parole review.

Fiscal Impact

Removing the illogical cutoff date and extending early parole consideration to those under 26 at the time of their offense would be fiscally transformative, saving Connecticut hundreds of millions of dollars in the long run.¹² Previous fiscal notes for juvenile early parole eligibility bills have underestimated the policy’s true impact because they measure only short-term, variable-cost savings (things like clothing, food, and other supplies that drop immediately when someone leaves custody) across a two-year budget window. Last year, the Office of Fiscal Analysis estimated savings of about \$3,300 per person per year for last year’s sHB-7133, a bill seeking to remove the October 1, 2005, cutoff date. But the Office of Fiscal Analysis’s narrow framing (calculating the savings at \$6,600 over the first two years) misses the biggest source of savings: the decades of incarceration the state avoids when someone is safely released after serving an extreme sentence.

For example, if an individual has served 30 years of a 60-year sentence, the full cost of the remaining 28 years of incarceration—estimated at \$62,159¹³ per person per year—leads to an additional \$1,740,452 in savings per person. This figure takes into account the long-run savings linked to the major costs of incarceration, including health care, staffing, facilities, and administration/overhead. Those are the costs that dominate correctional spending and persist as long as beds remain occupied. What happens when Connecticut avoids paying for 20, 30, or 40 additional years of incarceration for people who can safely reenter the community?

For every 100 individuals released under this framework, the state could save roughly \$174 million in long-term incarceration costs—money that can be reinvested in reentry assistance, education, or victim-support programs. This is significant budget relief that only builds over time when long-term incarceration is avoided and beds remain unfilled. Critically, Connecticut’s prison population is aging—meaning health care costs will continue rising. As of January 15, 2026, of the 7,214 people incarcerated in the state, 44.2% are over the age of 40. Health care costs increase substantially with age in correctional settings, so long-run savings from release are likely even larger for older individuals and those with elevated medical needs.

The question is whether Connecticut can afford to keep paying for unnecessary decades of incarceration when evidence, development, and public safety all point toward a more rational approach.

Recommendation Justification

The Community Expertise Workgroup (CEW) presents this recommendation to ensure that policy implementation reflects the lived experience of those directly affected by the justice system. This proposal is not merely an advisory document, but a direct, actionable mechanism designed to implement the core pillars of the recently adopted 2025–2029 Strategic Plan. The core goal of this initiative works to expand and redefine rehabilitative and developmental opportunities specifically for Emerging Adults (individuals generally aged 18–25 within the justice system). While the state has made commendable strides in enhancing Conditions of Confinement and improving Reentry services, this proposal builds upon that foundation by addressing a critical gap. It seeks to establish systemic, age-appropriate, and developmentally responsive systems of rehabilitation. This is particularly vital for the cohort of emerging adults who are currently serving sentences that are, in effect, functionally life-long due to their excessive length and the lack of meaningful opportunities for personal growth and release.

The CEW proposal offers an immediate intervention to advance equity, fairness, and justice for all young people, particularly those over the age of 18 who have largely been excluded from current reforms. It achieves this by adopting a developmentally responsive approach centered on Emerging Adults—the population where systemic disparities are most

pronounced and the potential consequences are highest. By addressing the documented racial and ethnic disparities affecting Black and Hispanic youth and emerging adults, this recommendation directly confronts a core challenge. It aligns with the Strategic Plan's mandate to eliminate disparities by providing an immediate, equitable strategy to strengthen rehabilitation, reduce systemic inequities, and support successful reintegration.

Our proposed reform extends recognized age-appropriate developmental protections against disproportionate punishment for emerging adults and resolves a statutory inconsistency where access to review is precluded by arbitrary cutoffs. The restrictions currently in place function as categorical exclusions that determine parole eligibility by sentencing date rather than an individual's age at the time of offense and ignore well-documented neurological research confirming that the capacity to rationalize, control impulses, and resist negative peer influence extends until the age of 26. By prioritizing maturity, personal accountability, and demonstrated rehabilitation, this proposal provides a statutory pathway to a meaningful opportunity for review, ensuring continued confinement is imposed only when necessary and appropriate as determined by present risk.

1. *Promote fairness and evidence-based parole decisions.*
2. *Align sentencing with developmental science to reduce disparities, prioritize rehabilitation and public safety through structured review.*
3. *Ensure victim support and engagement are prioritized through trauma-informed, comprehensive frameworks," would make the proposal more holistic*

Proposed Recommendations Components

Part 1: Legislative Action: Address a critical flaw in the current statutes for emerging adults.

1. *Remove Arbitrary Cutoffs for Current Eligible Population* Amend C.G.S. § 54-125a(g) to repeal the October 1, 2005, qualifying sentencing date. This ensures that all individuals who committed crimes while under age 21 are eligible for parole review based on their age at the time of the offense and their demonstrated rehabilitation, regardless of the calendar date of their sentencing. This immediate action will restore eligibility for 212 currently excluded emerging adults, the vast majority of whom are Black and Hispanic.

Part 2: Required Planning for Future Expansion (Report Due July 1, 2026)

The JJPOC shall convene a working group, including representatives from the Judicial Branch, Board of Pardons and Paroles (BOPP), the Department of Correction (DOC), the Office of Victim Services (OVS), the Office of the Chief Public Defender, the Division of Criminal Justice, as well as directly impacted representatives and community stakeholders, to develop a comprehensive plan for the responsible expansion of emerging adult protections up to age 26.

This plan shall be delivered to the JJPOC by July 1, 2026, with an effective date of October 1, 2027. The plan shall include consideration for:

1. A Framework for Enhanced Victim Support and Engagement: The working group shall develop a detailed framework to ensure victims are fully supported, informed, and engaged in the parole review process for emerging adults, without compromising the integrity of the review. This framework shall include recommendations for:

1. Statutory changes to mandate enhanced, trauma-informed notification processes that clearly explain the nature of emerging adult reviews.
2. Designated advocates within OVS to provide dedicated, end-to-end support for victims navigating hearings.
3. Processes to ensure victim statements are considered by the Board in a manner consistent with the principles of restorative justice and the overall goals of the policy.

2. A Framework for Sentencing Considerations: The working group shall develop recommendations for statutory amendments to C.G.S. § 54-91g, requiring courts to consider "Miller" factors (brain science, maturity, capacity for change) at the time of sentencing for all defendants under age 26 facing serious felony charges, ensuring upstream alignment with the parole reforms.

3. A Framework for Presumptive Release: The working group shall develop a detailed framework for implementing a rebuttable presumption of suitability for parole release for eligible emerging adults. This framework shall specify:

- a. The evidentiary standard required to rebut the presumption (e.g., clear and convincing evidence of current unreasonable risk).
- b. The specific criteria and risk assessment tools that will be used to evaluate current risk, ensuring they are developmentally appropriate and validated for this population.
- c. The procedural mechanisms for how the burden shift will function in practice during parole hearings.

4. Comprehensive Study to Inform Future Expansion (Due Dec 1, 2026) The JJPOC, shall conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the implementation and outcomes of existing statutes expanding parole eligibility for individuals under age 21 (pursuant to P.A. 23-169). *The study shall include, but not be limited to:*

- a. Parole grant vs. denial rates for the under-21 population since implementation.

- b. Recidivism outcomes for individuals released under these provisions compared to the general population.
- c. An analysis of the administrative capacity required by the BOPP to process these reviews.
- d. Recommendations and a projected timeline for the responsible expansion of these protections to emerging adults up to age 26, incorporating findings on brain development and public safety.
- e. The findings and recommendations shall be delivered to the JJPOC by December 1, 2026 and shall inform the planning for emerging adult protection under Part 2 inclusive of subsections 1-3.

Currently, people 21 and under sentenced before October 1, 2005, can be considered for parole if they have served sixty percent of their sentence or twelve years in prison.

Connecticut already recognizes that young people deserve a second chance. The proposed recommendation fixes the arbitrary cutoff date currently excluding hundreds of individuals from eligibility for parole review, ensures the law aligns with science by recognizing brain development in emerging adults, and reinforces truth and fairness in parole decision making through clear evidentiary standards. These evidence-based protocols ensure that parole decisions and resource allocation effectively manage risk, strengthen rehabilitation, and advance public safety.