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A More Developmentally Responsive Justice System: Using Research to Change Louisiana's Policies and Improve Public Safety

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The Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center, Institute for Public Health & Justice (IPHJ), studied the state of the justice system as it relates to how 17-year-olds are treated criminally in Louisiana. The study, submitted to the Louisiana Legislature in 2016, was designed to determine the potential impact of raising the age of juvenile jurisdiction from 16 to 17. The study, commissioned by the legislature, became the catalyst behind Louisiana's Raise the Age Law, signed by Governor Edwards last year. It also earned the National Legislative Research Librarians' Document Award from the National Conference of State Legislatures that same year.

The study put forth that Louisiana is one of only nine states that prosecute and jail 17-year-olds in the adult criminal justice system regardless of crime. According to the study, the top charge most frequently reported when 17-year-olds are booked into adult jails in Louisiana, is marijuana possession. In fact, none of the top ten crimes leading 17-year-olds to be booked into Louisiana jails are listed as violent offences. Beyond jail, the study explained how these adult charges remain on over 6000 teenagers' criminal records annually for the rest of his or her life as they apply for work and college. Moreover, when 17-year-olds are considered adults in the justice system, law enforcement is under no obligation to involve parent(s) or guardians in arrest and prosecution proceedings. In other words, a 17-year-old who is not allowed to vote, serve in

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the military without parental permission, or enter into a contract without his or her guardian, is left to make decisions in the adult justice system that may change the rest of their life.

Like most public health endeavors, this was a multi-disciplinary effort. To perform the study and compile the report, the team of the IPHJ worked with, and received information from many state agencies and groups, including Louisiana Center for Children's Rights, the Louisiana Commission on Law Enforcement, the Office of Juvenile Justice, the Department of Safety and Corrections, the Southern Poverty Law Center, and many others. The conclusions were clear. Louisiana should raise the age of juvenile court jurisdiction to include 17-year-old offenders. Findings suggest that this change would benefit public safety, promote youth rehabilitation and create long term-savings. With the passage of the law, the IPHJ is now working as an appointed member of the Louisiana Juvenile Jurisdiction Planning & Implementation Commission. The first phase of the new law is slated to go into affect in July of 2018, when all non-violent 17-year-old offenders will be handled through the juvenile justice system and no longer the adult system. By 2020, all 17-year-old juvenile offenders will be handled through the juvenile justice system.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE: Social justice is at the root of Public Health. Studying populations, understanding evolving research, predicting how change will impact society, and translating that into policy and practice by actively engaging various groups is how Public Health contributes to making systems more equitable and responsive. Public health practice is about looking for ways to increase the likelihood of improved outcomes for populations like the 17-year-olds in Louisiana that will soon be received by a more developmentally appropriate system.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Dr. Phillippi and the work of the IPHJ has shown that raising the age of juvenile jurisdiction from 16 to 17 has lifelong implications for youth and individuals close to them. While continued research, education, and policy on social justice as it concerns public health is needed, clearly creating savings for the state while promoting youth rehabilitation is a win-win for Louisiana.



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Stephen Phillippi, PhD is the Chair of Behavioral & Community Health Sciences at the LSU School of Public Health. Dr. Phillippi is also the Director of the Institute for Public Health & Justice working to bring evidence-based practices and supportive policies to states and local communities. He received his PhD from LSU, MSW from Tulane, and BA from Loyola New Orleans. He is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker and Clinically Certified Forensic Counselor. He has a twenty-year history of developing, managing, evaluating, and providing direct services. Dr. Phillippi is the PI on several studies, teaches, writes, consults, and participates in a number of professional and public service boards.