

### **N.C. passed raise the age. But what about education and health funding?**

Before the 20th century, juveniles were treated the same as adults in court. The juvenile justice system has only existed for about 100 years, yet North Carolina waited until this year to finally raise the age of minors in the system—making it the last state to do so.

It is not until 2019, however, that 16- and 17-year-olds will stop being punished the same as adults.

Luke Beyer, a junior majoring in political science and environmental studies, is the co-chair for UNC's Criminal Justice Awareness and Action committee. He said one of the most eye-opening facts is that the majority of youth in North Carolina youth development centers are of ages 13-16.

"There was an 8-year-old in detention for kidnapping his teacher when in reality he was just standing in front of the door," Beyer said.

Beyer spends every Saturday volunteering at Durham County Youth Home, our local juvenile detention center, and he organizes different activities for the minors. Some activities are more enjoyable, such as building gingerbread houses, and others are more educational, such as working on interview skills and writing resumes.

"Their reactions are very positive," Beyer said. "We [the volunteers] go with the intention of serving as a distraction and a reminder that people care about them. By the end of the sessions, they seem to be having a good time and they open up to us more."

Beyer believes the justice system is flawed and more money needs to be invested in education programs.

"The minors are able to take classes online, but they barely even have a teacher," he said. "A 'teacher' comes in and just checks off their assignments."

According to the *GPSOLO magazine*, "one in ten children in the United States suffers from a mental illness. Of those, 60 to 70 percent are children of color whose only access to mental health treatment is through the juvenile justice system."

Not only is mental health an issue within the juvenile justice system, but also racial and ethnic disparities.

"At least 85 percent of the minors in the Durham County Youth Home are African American or Hispanic," said Beyer. These disparities ultimately weaken the credibility of our justice system that claims to treat everyone fairly.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation argues "detention is not an equal opportunity program: throughout the 1980s and 1990s, as the detention population grew, four out of five newly detained youths were youths of color."

Paul Cuadros, an associate professor at UNC, serves as the executive director of the UNC Scholars' Latinx Initiative, a three-year mentoring and college preparatory program between UNC students and Latinx high school students. He is also the co-founder of the Carolina Latinx Collaborative, the Latinx educational and cultural center at UNC.

Cuadros worries about how the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals policy will affect immigrants and their families.

“DACA is a complex issue that might get kicked down the road until after the elections in December,” Cuadros said. “This will leave many recipients open and susceptible for deportation, which will tear many families apart.”

Most immigrants who have been convicted of a crime are ineligible to apply for DACA, thus decreasing the racial disproportion between juvenile offenders.

The American Bar Association explains in *GPSOLO* that reducing racial disparities “requires specific strategies aimed at eliminating bias and ensuring a level playing field for youth of color. Change in this arena also requires persistent, determined leadership because the sensitive nature of these discussions and changes frequently provoke defensiveness and avoidance.”

UNC's Criminal Justice Awareness and Action committee is spreading awareness this week (Feb. 19-23) with speakers, discussions, performances and screenings.

Not only are they also working with Project BUILD to prevent gang involvement, but they are challenging others to learn about the criminal justice occurring in local communities.