New report from the Justice Lab shows that emerging adults are disproportionately impacted by the drug abuse crisis in Massachusetts:
Criminal justice reform is a key part of the solution

Contacts:  Lael Chester, 617-949-0172, lec2115@columbia.edu
Vincent Schiraldi, 212-851-2403, vs2637@columbia.edu

New York City The Justice Lab at Columbia University released a new report today: Combating the Crisis: Using justice reform to address the drug epidemic among emerging adults. Written by Selen Siringil Perker and Lael Chester, the report highlights the failure of the supply-focused criminal justice system in tackling the drug epidemic—especially among the most vulnerable age group of youth ages 18 to 25.

With drugs having become more potent, more deadly, and easier to access, the current drug crisis has become dire for all ages. In Massachusetts, for instance, total opioid-related deaths have increased 350% since 2000. But as the new report explains, the effect on emerging adults is particularly tragic:

- Substance-related offenses are the leading cause of arrests for emerging adults, constituting over a quarter of all arrests of 18 and 19-year-olds in Massachusetts in 2014.
- 2/3 of adults in treatment for opioid addiction started using opioids before age 25.
- Opioids accounted for more than a quarter of all fatalities in the 18 – 24 age group in Massachusetts.
- There has been no thorough evaluation of the effectiveness of the substance use disorder treatment for emerging adults incarcerated in Massachusetts; moreover, treatment that has been provided to approximately 25% of inmates of all ages in Massachusetts has failed to show any significant reduction in the risk of fatal overdose.
- Emerging adults released from incarceration in Massachusetts are approximately 10 times more likely to die from opioids than people released from incarceration ages 45 and older. This is on top of the already high risk of opioid-related death for those formerly incarcerated persons, which is 120 times higher than the rest of the adult population.
“Research shows that emerging adults are a distinct developmental group,” explains Vincent Schiraldi, Senior Research Scientist at the Justice Lab and former Commissioner of Probation in New York City and Director of juvenile corrections in Washington, DC. “Unfortunately, our justice system automatically treats them as if they were 40 or even 70, with little or no recognition of their developmental needs. The results are disastrous, not only for public safety but for addressing the rising drug epidemic.”

Lead author Selen Siringil Perker notes, “there are a number of public health opportunities for the effective treatment of emerging adults, including medication-assisted treatment programs and behavioral therapy, as well as the promising adaptation of Multi-systemic Therapy for Emerging Adults. And the cost savings are big; for every dollar spend on effective treatment, $4 is saved in later health care costs and $7 in criminal justice costs.”

Parts of the criminal justice reform bills that are now under consideration by the Commonwealth’s legislature recognize the developmental differences of emerging adults and potentially expand rehabilitative services to more emerging adults, particularly the proposal to include most 18-year-olds in the juvenile justice system.

“The fact that the American Academy of Pediatrics has pushed for the continued pediatric care of youth up to age 21 and even beyond is important,” says Lael Chester, the co-author. “An arbitrary demarcation set on one’s eighteenth birthday in our legal system should not dictate effective treatment and effective criminal justice responses.”

Sheriff Steve Tompkins from Suffolk County has been a vocal advocate for addressing the needs of emerging adults involved in the justice system. “Just locking up young people is not the answer. These young people with substance use disorders are leaving our jails and dying. The justice system must adopt a more effective, public health approach to this crisis.”

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