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New Report Links Childhood Trauma to Kids Tried in Adult Courts

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Human Rights for Kids (HRFK) today released a national report documenting the lived experiences of people prosecuted in adult courts for offenses committed as children. The findings reveal a consistent pattern: these young people were victims first. Long before any arrest, respondents described severe abuse, exploitation, and neglect; once in the system, they encountered practices that compounded harm rather than addressing it.

Across the sample, **90.11%** said their childhood trauma was never considered at sentencing. Nearly four in five were **held in solitary confinement before turning 18**, and **31.01%** reported being victims of some form of trafficking. **More than one-quarter** described **forced criminality** - being coerced into committing crimes. Together, this data shifts the first question from ‘*what did this kid do?*’ to ‘*what happened to this child, and why didn’t our systems intervene sooner?*’

The report traces protection gaps from first contact onward. Respondents recounted prolonged interrogations without a parent or attorney - some “for nine hours” - followed by charging and sentencing in which trauma and adolescent development were rarely weighed. Inside adult facilities, isolation and exposure to adults were common, despite evidence that such practices are uniquely damaging to youth and do not improve public safety.

“I was not born bad but rather I was ill equipped to handle my early traumas and used criminality as a coping mechanism. I did not know how to voice that I was hurting and needed help.” — Report participant

HRFK’s analysis points to clear reforms that recognize children as victims too:

- **Raise transfer age & modernize jurisdiction:** Set the minimum age for transfer to adult court at 16, and extend juvenile jurisdiction for 12–15-year-olds adjudicated for serious offenses up to

age 25.

- **Restore judicial review of transfer:** End direct file and statutory exclusions; require a juvenile court judge to hear transfer petitions for 16–17-year-olds.
- **Protect exploited children:** Prohibit prosecuting a child as an adult when the offense was committed against or alongside someone who had previously sexually abused or trafficked them.
- **Mandate that trauma and youth status be considered:** Require courts (juvenile and criminal) to consider Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and childhood trauma at transfer, disposition, and sentencing; allow departures from mandatory minimums and enhancements when sentencing children.
- **Unlock second chances:** Provide retroactive resentencing and ensure parole or judicial review eligibility so sentences imposed on children reflect trauma, development, and the opportunity for growth.

“Public safety improves when we see and humanely respond to the abuse, exploitation, and neglect that leads children to commit crime in the first place,,” said James Dold, CEO and Founder of Human Rights for Kids. *“This report shows why a child-centered approach: protection, treatment, and age-appropriate accountability - is both the moral and the effective path.”*

HRFK leaders, survivor advocates, pediatric and behavioral-health experts, and youth-justice practitioners are available for interviews and on-background briefings.

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About Human Rights for Kids

Human Rights for Kids is a non-profit organization dedicated to the promotion and protection of the human rights of children. We use an integrated, multi-faceted approach which consists of research & public education, coalition building & grassroots mobilization, and policy advocacy & strategic litigation to advance critical human rights on behalf of children in the United States and around the world.