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SB 494

Juveniles Convicted as Adults - Sentencing - Limitations and Reduction (Juvenile Restoration Act)

Hearing before the House Judiciary Committee, January 21, 2021

Position: SUPPORT

The Public Justice Center (PJC) supports SB 494 as a matter of simple justice. Maryland's current practice of sentencing children to life sentences without the possibility of parole or release has been widely recognized as inhumane, unnecessary for public safety, and expensive. Moreover, the burden of falls disproportionately, shockingly so in our state, on Black youth. This practice must end now.

Neuroscience has shown that youth lack the same capacity as adults both to appreciate the consequences of their acts and to control their impulses. Yet we punish them as hardened criminals. Scientific research has also shown that very few individuals convicted for crimes committed in their teens who are released after decades in prison commit another crime. So the risk of allowing the possibility of release is minimal.

Finally, studies have also shown that Black children are perceived to be older, more mature, and more dangerous than similar white children. As a result, a staggering 82 % of youth serving life without parole in Maryland, the highest percentage of any state, are Black. This is not a distinction to be proud of.

During this pandemic, we need to reduce our prison population as much as possible to ensure the life and safety of those inside, as well as the staff and the communities in which they reside. It is thus critical to give the people who would be eligible under this bill the chance for freedom.

The PJC is a non-profit legal advocacy organization dedicated to racial equity and ending poverty. Its Prisoners Rights Project seeks basic justice through reform in our criminal justice system and an end to all unnecessary detention and incarceration.

The PJC urges a FAVORABLE REPORT on SB 494. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact Debra Gardner, Legal Director, at gardnerd@publicjustice.org or 410 625 9409 ext 228.

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