

February 6, 2024

Dear Senators and Delegates,

My name is Linda Girdner, I am a resident of District 33A. I am a retired mental health professional who spent some years treating children in a community mental health facility in Lanham, MD. I am submitting this testimony against Juvenile Law - Reform (HB 814/SB 744). This is an anti-youth justice bill. I am urging you to vote against Juvenile Law - Reform HB 814/SB 744.

There has actually been a decrease in crime. A report by WJZ-TV about a month ago said that law enforcement officials reported that there had been a reduction in crime in Baltimore City, for example. But now many who work in the criminal justice system are trying to say the opposite. As we have seen, perception and untruths repeated enough times lead people away from reality and into fear, suspicion, and bills like this.

This legislation proposes changes in law that rollback elements of the progress made with the 2022 Juvenile Justice Reform Act and it is out of step with what data show are effective juvenile justice policies. Ultimately, the impact of these proposals will be to incarcerate thousands more children, particularly Black and Brown children. Black people in Maryland already are incarcerated at a rate 5.3 times higher than white people.

Will the taxpayers have to pay for more prisons? How does being in a cell help children, their families, or their communities? Let's put our tax dollars to work to provide services to these children and their families, so that they can be assets to their communities.

Pass bills that increase services for children before they commit crimes. Governor Moore just created an Office for Children and an Office of Crime Prevention and Policy (see [Governor Moore Signs Executive Order Establishing the Governor's Office for Children and Governor's Office of Crime Prevention and Policy](#)). In this press release, it says that

“The Governor’s Office for Children will lead statewide efforts to build a comprehensive network of supports, programs, and services for children and their families to promote social and emotional well-being; reduce food insecurity; combat youth homelessness; expand access to health services; improve education outcomes and job readiness; expand access to good jobs; and increase economic opportunity in sustainable ways.

This is exactly what we should be doing for children, who through no fault of their own, have meager support systems and resources. The Juvenile Law - Reform bills would be doing the opposite: spending all of our resources on crime and punishment, which DOES NOT WORK! Instead we know that investing in programming and services that are proven to change behavior is what works. Let's move away from the unsuccessful punishment model of earlier centuries.

I agree with the solution proposed by Natasha M. Dartigue, Maryland Office of the Public Defender. She said

“The solution lies in establishing a Commission on Juvenile Justice Reform and Emerging and Best Practices, which with the proper balance of stakeholders is the logical continuation of the Juvenile Justice Reform Council that drafted the 2022 laws. Those serious about safety must allow such a commission to build on the progress

made, identify where resources can be reallocated to reduce incarceration, and promote positive adjustment, rather than be forced to examine a continuing record of Maryland refusing to care for its children...”

It is for all of these reasons that I respectfully urge you to return an unfavorable report on Juvenile Law - Reform (HB 814/SB 744).

Sincerely,

Linda Girdner, Ph.D.
Gambrills, MD