

HB 814
Juvenile Law - Reform
UNFAVORABLE

Submitted by: Magdalena Tsiongas, MPH

Dear Chair Clippinger, Vice Chair Barlett, and members of the Judiciary Committee,

I, Magdalena Tsiongas, oppose HB814 as written, and ask for an unfavorable report.

Having worked in public schools in Baltimore for years, I know the importance of investment in our children through education, recreational programs and workforce development. I also know the importance of treating children like children, even when they make mistakes. This is why I work in diversion, diverting kids from criminal prosecution and why I lead restorative justice circles to support those harmed in reaching accountability. Unfortunately, while HB814 was introduced amid promises of increased support and services to help kids make better choices, the details of the legislation focus almost exclusively on expanding the net of incarceration—which is known to put kids at heightened risk of personal, sexual, and emotional harm and, according to 20 years of research and experience, results in more recidivism and crime, not less.

For almost 20 years, since he was 19, my own family member has been incarcerated in a Maryland prison. I know too well what criminalization, over investment in community diversion looks like, particularly for Black families in Maryland.

At its core, HB814 exacerbates racial disparities, ignores evidence-based best practices for improving public safety, and does not provide policy solutions or services that will improve youth behavior. Instead, this bill targets 10-12 year olds and misdemeanors, not the primary drivers of actual crime. The authors of this bill have conceded the bill addresses a “crime perception problem.” It also extends probation, which does not set up children for success.

Black children should not be the scapegoats for fearmongering in the press. Communities need investment in crime PREVENTION through restorative justice, mediation, mental health supports and more, not increased supervision and punishment after the fact.

For these reasons, I urge an unfavorable vote on HB 814.