



February 16, 2023

Honorable Senator William C. Smith
Chair, Judicial Proceedings Committee
Miller Senate Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Re: Testimony in **SUPPORT of SB93 Youth Equity & Safety Act**

Hello Chair Smith and members of the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee:

On behalf of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, I thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of Senate Bill 93 introduced by Senator Jill Carter. CAIR is America's largest Muslim civil rights and advocacy organization. I am CAIR's government affairs intern in Maryland.

The Youth Equity and Safety Act seeks to amend the juvenile court's jurisdiction by repealing provisions stating that the juvenile court does not have jurisdiction over a child alleged to have committed certain acts.¹

The YES Act changes the way teens charged with serious felonies enter the justice system. Rather than trying teens as adults for certain crimes, the YES Act establishes that all youth under the age of 18 begin their cases in juvenile court. In doing so we are able to decrease the number of offenders that repeat the crimes which land them in jail.

According to the U.S. Department of Justice: "To best achieve reductions in recidivism, the overall number of juvenile offenders transferred to the criminal justice system should be minimized."²

On a personal note, as a Black student who attends high school in a predominantly White county, I constantly witness people of color receive harsher punishments for misdemeanors. Moreover, Black students are 3.5 times more likely to be suspended than their white counterparts.³ But these occurrences don't only just happen within school systems. Over 80% of youth charged in adult court in Maryland are Black, and they are more likely to be sent to adult prison and receive longer sentences than their White counterparts for similar offenses.⁴

Our justice system is presumably built on the core values of honesty, integrity, and equal justice under law, but how can we stand for these principles when so many Black teens are being judged harsher just because of the color of their skin. It goes beyond that. When you send a juvenile to adult prison, you give them a label, a label that their growth, their development ends at that point in time, and that they are less likely to be capable of redeeming themselves and integrating back into society. And teenagers with undeveloped

brains will be more likely to internalize these labels and hold onto them for the rest of their lives because they were never given a chance to rehabilitate.

It's important to mention that the YES Act does not prevent prosecutors from seeking to move a teenager's case to adult court as they can still attempt to move cases from juvenile to adult court at a judge's discretion. What it does do is give youth an opportunity, a chance to right their wrongdoings. We are the future of this nation, and we as a nation cannot proceed with its brightest minds behind bars.

Passing SB93 is a meaningful component of effective systemic reform that would help not only save young people's lives but also give them a better chance for a better future. Therefore, we support this bill and respectfully urge your favorable vote. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Flematu Fofana
Intern, CAIR Office in Maryland
Council on American-Islamic Relations
Email: mdintern@cair.com

1. [YES Act Fact Sheet - MYJC.docx](#)
2. <https://www.justice.gov/usao-wdtn/core-values>
3. <https://law.vanderbilt.edu/news/should-juveniles-be-tried-as-adults/>
4. <https://www.insidehighered.com/admissions/article/2020/10/05/common-app-stop-asking-students-about-their-high-school-disciplinary#:~:text=Removing%20the%20discipline%20question%20is,Rickard%2C%20CEO%20of%20Common%20App.>