



**PREPARE**  
PREpare for PARole and REentry

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**HBO636 - Juvenile Law – Commission to Study the Ability of the  
Department of Juvenile Services to Provide Effective Social Services to  
Juvenile Offenders - SUPPORT**

There are drastic and frightening changes proposed to juvenile law this session, many of which would result in the incarceration of fourth and fifth graders although no proper infrastructure exists to provide for their care. In fact, there are serious questions about the care that older children are currently receiving in DJS, most recently and seriously illustrated by 200 allegations of sexual abuse at DJS facilities, many of which are still in operation.<sup>1</sup> I am glad to see HBO636 proposing a more measured and conservative approach of studying the problem and building infrastructure first, and placing children in care only when appropriate services are available. I urge a favorable report.

As frustrating as youth crime is, it is important that we never lose sight of the fact that these children are Maryland's future. Reacting quickly and punitively to the actions of children without considering the underlying behavioral causes or providing for proper care and rehabilitation of those children sets a frightening precedent and sets our state up for long term failure. An interesting example of similar action occurred in Rutherford County, Tennessee, where Judge Donna Scott Davenport took it upon herself to incarcerate children for nonviolent crimes.<sup>2</sup> She worked over two decades, locking up 48% of children that came in front of her (the national average is 5%). Forced into retirement, her legacy is one of abuse, trauma, and racial injustice. The JJRA is a frightening echo of many of her policies, detailed in the cited article.

Rutherford County is a cautionary tale of what happens when a single branch of government takes extreme action against children without consulting those with expertise - people like social workers, mental health workers, educators, and other community stakeholders. Maryland can do better. We know we have a problem - let's take our time, do the work, and develop an effective solution.

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<sup>1</sup> Lea Skene, 200 victims allege child sex abuse in Maryland youth detention facilities, Associated Press, 2/8/2024, <https://apnews.com/article/maryland-juvenile-detention-child-sexual-abuse-lawsuits-f16ecfb7c76da6c46f538152c95a215f>

<sup>2</sup> Meribah Knight, Black Children Were Jailed for a Crime That Doesn't Exist. Almost Nothing Happened to the Adults in Charge., Pro Publica, 10/8/2021  
<https://www.propublica.org/article/black-children-were-jailed-for-a-crime-that-doesnt-exist>

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