

February 13, 2024

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Baltimore, MD



TESTIMONY IN OPPOSITION to SB0052  
Juvenile Justice Restoration Act of 2024

TO: Chair Smith, Vice Chair Walstreicher, and members of the Judicial Proceedings Committee

FROM: Samantha Blau, on behalf of Jews United for Justice

My name is Samantha Blau, and I am a resident of Baltimore's Patterson Place neighborhood, in District 46. I am submitting this testimony on behalf of Jews United for Justice (JUFJ). JUFJ organizes 6,000 Jewish Marylanders and allies from across the state in support of social, racial, and economic justice campaigns.

Jewish Tradition teaches that the divine encompasses both justice and mercy. Locking up kids and leaving them without a chance to grow is the opposite of mercy and justice. Year after year this committee hears from their own appointed work group, the state's Department of Juvenile Services, experts in child development, and former youth caught up in the juvenile system. Their message is all the same: that creating harsher punishment will not deter children from involvement with the justice system, nor improve the lives of kids in crisis. And year after year this group of legislators hears from sheriffs, police, and states' attorneys about how punishment and incarceration are the only options that will reform these kids.

Maryland is not made safer when "tough on crime" policies –like locking up kids– are instituted. Maryland's youth need access to programs that help them grow and learn from their mistakes. Until kids are given these opportunities, the lives of the children that your actions will affect will continue to be hard and unsafe. A child in crisis, that does not have the material and emotional support they need, will not be made whole by this bill. They also will not be prevented from spreading the harm they are experiencing. Like a train derailing because the brakes were out of order will not be prevented by a sign noting a curve, a child who is hurt, without support, and acting out cannot be stopped because the criminal code now carries larger penalties.

The work of preventing crime is difficult and expensive. It will only be achieved with a strong social safety net that includes universal access to healthcare and mental healthcare, universal basic income, universal pre-K, better pay and support for teachers and school support staff, increased funding for libraries, parks and rec departments, and other safe third spaces. The easy way forward is to pass this bill and pretend to not know what the right thing is for these kids. The hard work of the job is to listen to advocates and experts, think creatively, and be willing to pass legislation that makes a positive change.

I urge this committee to choose to do the hard work and to issue an unfavorable report on SB0052.