



Testimony for the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee

March 11th, 2025

SB 1001- Criminal Procedure - Evidence - Protecting the Admissibility of Creative Expression (PACE Act)

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The ACLU of Maryland urges support for SB 1001, which seeks to create needed guidelines on the admissibility of creative expression-based evidence in criminal proceedings. SB 1001 reinforces the legal protections guaranteed to all Marylanders by the First Amendment.

One of the primary legal issues SB 1001 addresses is the interpretation and relevance of creative expression, such as rap lyrics, in criminal proceedings. There is inherent ambiguity and subjectivity involved in interpreting artistic works, especially those rooted in cultural contexts such as rap music.¹ Without clear guidelines and criteria for assessing the intent and relevance of creative expression, there is a risk of misinterpretation and prejudice against defendants.

Another issue that SB 1001 combats is the potential for creative expression to be misused as evidence of guilt or criminal behavior. Throughout the country, and more importantly the state of Maryland, rap lyrics have been introduced as evidence in criminal trials to portray defendants as violent or dangerous individuals, without proper consideration of the artistic nature of the expression or the context in which it was created.² As recently as 2021, the Maryland Court of Appeals ruled rap lyrics against a defendant admissible, which ultimately led to a 50-year prison sentence for the defendant.³ SB 1001

¹https://www.americanbar.org/groups/communications_law/publications/communications_lawyer/2023-winter/lyrics-limine-rap-music-and-criminal-prosecutions/#52

² *Id.*

³Kutner, B. (2021, January 2). *Maryland Appeals Court allows rap lyrics to be used in murder trial*. Court House News. Retrieved March 7, 2025, from <https://www.courthousenews.com/maryland-appeals-court-allows-rap-lyrics-to-be-used-in-murder-trial/>

seeks to address this issue by requiring the court to make specific findings regarding the intent, relevance, and probative value of creative expression before admitting it as evidence. If there is no probative value to be gleaned from the creative expression in regard to the facts of the matter before the court, the evidence should not be admissible.

On First Amendment grounds, allowing instances of creative expression, such as rap lyrics, to be used against defendants in criminal proceedings could have a chilling effect on artistic expression, particularly within marginalized communities where rap music serves as a form of cultural expression and social commentary. The Maryland Court of Appeals has admitted as much with regard to rap lyrics and the “prejudicial effect that often accompanies their admission.” *Hannah v. State*, 420 Md. at 339. SB 1001 is needed in this state to ensure that the First Amendment right to creative expression is not infringed upon by our criminal justice system.

For these reasons we urge a favorable report on SB 1001.

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