

SB0709 - Criminal Law - Masked Intimidation - Prohibition (Unmask Hate Act)
Hearing before the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee
February 26, 2025
Position: UNFAVORABLE

My name is Michael Lent, I am a Parkville, MD resident and constituent of District 08. I am asking that the committee oppose the mask criminalization bill, SB 0709. Maryland must allow people with disabilities (such as those with compromised immune systems), and anyone concerned about their health, the ability to protect themselves with a face mask without fear. Carve outs in the bill for health or religious reasons are not enough. SB 0709 will inevitably add to the existing stigmas and harassment directed towards disabled people who mask for health reasons. It will also escalate biased law enforcement, which already disproportionately harms Marylanders who are Black, Indigenous, and/or People of Color (BIPOC). This legislation will create a chilling effect on anyone who simply wants to protect themselves from airborne illness as they go about their lives.

Criminalizing masking is bad policy for public health. This is especially true right now, as the Maryland Department of Health recommends masking due to high hospitalization rates for COVID, influenza, and RSV. We urgently need masking for protection against COVID infection, as 1 in every 10 COVID infections results in chronic and debilitating health conditions (i.e. Long COVID) and COVID disproportionately harms BIPOC communities and women. Federal public health guidance also recommends that anyone working with animals wear a face mask for protection against highly pathogenic H5N1 avian influenza (HPAI), which has been found in farms across Maryland. With high rates of COVID, influenza, and RSV in Maryland right now, combined with the potential threat of HPAI, why does the legislature think it is a good idea to advance any legislation that could discourage masking?

I respectfully urge this committee for an unfavorable report on HB0521.