



**Maryland House Judiciary Committee
Testimony of Rights4Girls
In Support of
HB 441**

February 06, 2024

Thank you, Chairman Clippinger and Members of the Committee for the opportunity to provide testimony on HB 441.

Rights4Girls is a national human rights organization dedicated to ending gender-based violence against young women and girls in the United States. Based in Washington, D.C., we work at the defend the rights of vulnerable young women and girls at the federal, state, and local levels through policy advocacy, research, training and technical assistance, and coalition building. For the last decade, we have worked with our partners at the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges to develop and lead the National Judicial Institute on Domestic Child Sex Trafficking and the National Multi-Disciplinary Institute on Child Sex Trafficking where we train judges, child welfare, juvenile justice, probation, law enforcement, and other systems professionals on how to identify and better serve child trafficking survivors they encounter and encourage them to end policies that punish girls for suffering and surviving abuse. We have also worked to shed light on the widespread criminalization of child survivors through the publication of reports like [*The Sexual Abuse to Prison Pipeline: The Girls' Story*](#) and our more recent report, [*Criminalized Survivors: Today's Abuse to Prison Pipeline*](#) which examines the very issue that this critical legislation seeks to address—child sex crime survivors who face extreme sentences often in the adult system for their attempts to defend themselves or escape violence. It is for these reasons that we strongly urge the committee to support HB 441.

Our research has highlighted that sexual abuse is a key driver of justice-involvement in girls. Alarming, across the nation, over 70% of girls behind bars report past experiences of abuse prior to entering the system. Our report, as well as subsequent research, found that when vulnerable girls experience abuse and trauma, they often lack access to support services and vital interventions needed to heal. Moreover, they are often failed by the adults and systems that are entrusted to keep them safe. This often forces them to take their safety into their own hands. Thus, girls are literally being incarcerated for their responses to trauma and violence because they are being denied resources and support. In many cases—because of who these girls are—they are even being denied their status as children and as victims of crime.



Girls of color bear the brunt of this punitive response with girls of color accounting for 62% of incarcerated girls even though they comprise only 24% of the youth population.

HB 441 is critical because it will allow child sexual abuse victims who defend themselves against their adult abusers the opportunity to access treatment and services in the juvenile system, instead of being tried as adults and routed into adult prison where child survivors risk additional trauma and violence, including sexual abuse by guards or adult prisoners.

HB 441 would help ensure that these children who fight back against their adult abusers never have to experience unnecessary decades of trauma in adult prison. By allowing these children to stay within the jurisdiction of the juvenile court, HB 441 will save so many children from a cycle of unnecessary harm.

As advocates who work at the intersection of juvenile justice, gender equality, and violence prevention, Rights4Girls strongly supports HB 441 because it is a critical step in shifting the response to child victims of violence. This legislation would create more just outcomes moving forward, help provide more insight into the experiences that contributed to a survivor's actions or inactions, and use a more developmentally appropriate and trauma-informed response to sentencing.

We ask that you consider HB 441 for what it is: a bill that will help the justice system remember they are looking at a child; a child who experienced abuse beyond comprehension. And we ask that you support its passage.

Thank you for your time and consideration.