



## OUT FOR JUSTICE

### TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SENATE BILL 537

TO: Judicial Proceedings

FROM: Out For Justice, Inc.

DATE: 6/19/2026

Out For Justice respectfully submits this testimony in support of Senate Bill 537 and in strong support of ending the automatic charging of children as adults in Maryland. We urge this Committee to center equity, fairness, and fundamental human rights in its deliberations.

**Maryland's practice of automatically charging children as adults disproportionately harms Black and Brown youth and youth from under-resourced communities.** This policy treats children as if they are fully formed adults, disregarding well-established research on adolescent development and ignoring the structural inequities that shape many young people's lives. **It undermines the core principle that children are categorically different from adults and deserving of rehabilitation, not permanent punishment.**

Autocharging is not simply a procedural decision—it is a human rights issue. When a child is placed into the adult criminal legal system, they are exposed to harsher penalties, prolonged detention, and lifelong collateral consequences. Youth charged as adults spend an average of 98 additional days in custody awaiting disposition compared to youth charged in juvenile court. At a cost of \$1,174 per day, this amounts to nearly \$147,000 per child held on adult charges. Beyond the fiscal impact, these additional days represent months of missed schooling, separation from family, and exposure to trauma that can permanently alter a child's trajectory.

In Fiscal Year 2024, youth charged as adults and awaiting transfer decisions represented nearly 60% of the Department of Juvenile Services' detained average daily population. DJS estimates that ending this practice could reduce its average daily population by approximately 120 youth and save nearly \$17 million annually. These are public dollars currently spent on extended detention rather than on services that would strengthen families and communities.

The Youth Delinquency Prevention Fund established under SB 537 reflects a Justice Reinvestment approach—shifting resources away from costly, racist, punitive



systems and into community-based prevention and intervention services. Justice Reinvestment recognizes that public safety is best achieved not through automatic adult prosecution of children, but through strategic investment in mental health care, education, workforce development, and trauma-informed support.

Prevention programs are embedded in the communities where young people live. They are responsive to local needs and provide safe, trusted spaces for families to address truancy, violence, trauma, bullying, depression, and suicidal ideation. Programs such as Youth Service Bureaus—mandated under Maryland law—provide group and family counseling, crisis intervention including suicide assessments, substance use assessments and referrals, and information and referral services. **Two years after receiving Youth Service Bureau services, 95% of youth were not re-involved in the justice system.** These outcomes demonstrate that children thrive when we invest in support rather than punishment.

Equity demands that Maryland confront policies that deepen racial disparities and entrench generational harm. Human rights principles require that children be treated in ways that recognize their developmental capacity for growth and change. Fiscal responsibility demands that we redirect resources from systems that exacerbate harm to programs that prevent it.

By ending the practice of automatically charging children as adults and creating the Youth Delinquency Prevention Fund, Maryland can realign its youth justice system with evidence, equity, and basic human dignity.

For these reasons, Out For Justice respectfully urges the Committee to issue a favorable report on SB 537.