



SB 323 Juvenile Court – Jurisdiction (Youth Charging Reform Act)
Position: Favorable

March 31, 2026

Dear Chair Bartlett, Vice Chair Davis, and members of the Judiciary Committee,

The Maryland Youth Justice Coalition (MYJC) is a diverse array of over 25 organizations dedicated to preventing children and adolescents from becoming involved in the legal system, upholding the highest standards of care when children do enter the legal system, and ensuring a platform for system-involved youth and their families to be heard. MYJC strives for a Maryland where no children are at risk of system involvement and, if they are involved with the legal system, they and their families receive every possible opportunity to define and live safe, healthy, and fulfilling lives through restorative practices supported by our state and local communities.

We urge the Judiciary Committee to issue a favorable report of SB 323.

This legislation seeks to address components of our state’s unacceptable system of automatically charging youth as adults, and is a critical step forward. While MYJC supports ending the practice of automatically charging people under 18 as if they were adults entirely, and beginning all cases involving youth (17 and younger) in juvenile court, we recognize this compromise legislation as much needed progress.

As amended, SB323 will save approximately 500 kids a year from experiencing the harms of automatic adult charging. The Senate amendments add provisions that will prevent youth that remain automatically charged from being housed in adult jails, and adds critical data and reporting requirements, including an annual report from the Commission on Juvenile Justice Reform and Emerging Best Practices.

As noted in our original testimony on HB 409, and SB 323 as introduced, MYJC supports this legislation because:

Maryland is a National Outlier on Automatic Charging

Under current Maryland law, some 14 and 15-year-olds, and most 16 and 17-year-olds are required to be automatically prosecuted in adult court for [33 offenses](#) – putting us out of step with other states and international human rights law.

Automatic-charging Harms Youth Wellbeing and Public Safety

Youth charged in adult court are less likely to receive rehabilitative services, which makes them more likely to reoffend than similarly situated youth charged in juvenile court.¹ Adult charging results in

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2007). [Effects on violence of laws and policies facilitating the transfer of youth from the juvenile to the adult justice system: A report on recommendations of the task force on community preventive services;](#)

increased physical violence, sexual violence, and isolation.

The Current System is Biased Against Black Youth

Black youth, overwhelmingly Black and brown, are overrepresented at every stage of the Maryland court system.² **Nearly 80% of youth charged in adult court in Maryland are Black.**³ Black youth are more likely to be prosecuted as adults⁴, and receive longer sentences than their white counterparts for similar offenses, in part because Black kids are more likely to be seen and treated as adults than white kids.⁵

“Tough on Crime” Laws Criminalize Kids and Make Us Less Safe

Research shows that “tough on crime” policy shifts during the 1980s and 1990s have negatively impacted children, families, and Black communities. Studies have found higher recidivism rates among kids tried and sentenced in adult court than among kids charged with similar offenses in juvenile court.

Automatically Charging Kids as Adults is Inefficient and Costly for the State

Keeping children and communities safe should be our highest priority. By requiring cases to start in juvenile court where a judge can review a case and decide whether it is in the best interest of both the youth and our communities to move the case to adult court, Maryland legislators would help produce better outcomes for youth, improve community safety, and save taxpayer money.

MYJC respectfully requests that this committee return a favorable report on SB 323

² Hagan J, Shedd C, Payne MR. Race, ethnicity, and youth perceptions of criminal injustice. *American Sociological Review*. 2005;70(3):381-407. See also, DJS Data Resource Guide FY2021, 241.

https://djs.maryland.gov/Documents/DRG/Data_Resource_Guide_FY2021.pdf.

³ Maryland Governor’s Office of Crime Prevention and Policy. *Juveniles charged as adults*. Retrieved from <https://app.powerbigov.us/view?r=eyJrIjojInZqZlBhYmMtNzVmOC00OGE2LWFKNzktZDliYzg5NzEyODU2liwidCI6IjYwYWZlOWUyLTQ5Y2QtNDliMS04ODUxLTY0ZGYwMjc2YTJlOCJ9>.

⁴ <https://www.baltimoresun.com/2025/01/29/marylands-youth-are-unfairly-criminalized-guest-commentary/>

⁵ Soler M. Health issues for adolescents in the justice system. *Journal of Adolescent Health*. 2002;31(6):321–333.