

Tuesday, February 10, 2026



Showing Up for Racial Justice

Dear Members of the Judiciary Committee,

I am submitting this testimony as a member of Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ) Baltimore, a group of individuals working to mobilize white people in a multi-racial movement for equity and racial justice in Baltimore City, Baltimore County, and Howard County. We are also working in collaboration with Out for Justice, which advocates for the reform of policies and practices that adversely affect incarcerated people's successful reintegration into society. I am a resident of Baltimore City and District 41. I am testifying **in support of HB409, the Youth Charging Reform Act.**

HB409 would end the practice of charging 14- and 15-year old children as adults, and ensure that only 16- and 17-year-olds accused of the most serious crimes, such as rape and murder, are charged in adult court.

Maryland was once progressive in its view of youth crime, but is now a national outlier in its practice of automatically charging young people as if they were adults. Unfortunately, after more than a century of progress in juvenile justice, in the 1990s Maryland reversed course and began to pass laws purporting to be "tougher" on youth crime, including requiring many charges against minors to be prosecuted in adult court by default.¹ Per capita, our state sends more young people to adult court based on offense type than every other state but Alabama.²

¹ Jason R. Tashea, & Al Passarella, *Youth Charged as Adults: The Use and Outcomes of Transfer in Baltimore City*, 14 U. Md. L.J. Race Relig. Gender & Class 273 (2015). <https://digitalcommons.law.umaryland.edu/rrgc/vol14/iss2/4>

² The Sentencing Project, National Trends in Charging Children, Presentation to the JJRC (July 20, 2021). <http://dls.maryland.gov/pubs/prod/NoPblTabMtg/CmsnJuvRefCncl/Sentencing-Project-National-Trends-inCharging-Children.pdf>

Additionally, the current judicial approach leads to the charging and incarceration of a disproportionate number of Black youth, as nearly 80% of Maryland youth charged in adult court are Black.³

The practice of charging children as adults is inhumane. As a child psychologist, I can attest that it is developmentally inappropriate to charge children as if they are in possession of the fully developed neurological and cognitive capacities of adults when they simply are not. It is devastatingly cruel and unethical to hold children to the same judicial standards as adults.

This practice is also economically wasteful and procedurally inefficient, as the vast majority of juvenile cases are either transferred to juvenile court or dismissed.⁴

Finally, statistics demonstrate that automatic charging of youth as adults does not decrease youth crime generally or reduce recidivism by the youth charged, indicating that this policy does not achieve what it was intended to do.⁵

By significantly decreasing the automatic charging of youth as adults, we can bring Maryland more into line with modern juvenile justice standards, redirect resources to treating rather than simply imprisoning young offenders, and ultimately improve the safety of our communities by preventing re-offending. It is for these reasons that I am encouraging you to vote **in support of HB409, the Youth Charging Reform Act.**

Thank you for your time, service, and consideration.

Sincerely,
Dr. Katherine Blaha
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Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ) Baltimore

³ Juvenile Justice Reform Council Supplemental Report, http://dls.maryland.gov/pubs/prod/NoPblTabMtg/CmsnJuvRefCncl/IJRC-Report-Final_2021SupplementalReport.pdf

⁴ In 2017-19, 48% of juveniles charged as adults in Baltimore City were returned to juvenile court, and 33% were dismissed or otherwise closed without a verdict. In MDEC counties the figures were 41% and 36% respectively. Juvenile Justice Reform Council Supplemental Report p 33.

⁵ Lila Kazemian, *Pathways to Desistance From Crime Among Juveniles and Adults: Applications to Criminal Justice Policy and Practice*, Nov. 2021 (internal citations removed), <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/301503.pdf>