

June 9th, 2020

Testimony on House Bill 381
House Criminal Justice Committee

Submitted by:
Lara Kowalcyk

**Re: Opposition to HB
318**

Chairman Lang, Vice Chair Plummer, Ranking Member Leland and all members of the House State Criminal Justice Committee,

My name is Lara Kowalcyk. I recently graduated from Grandview Heights High School and a resident of Columbus, Ohio. Thank you for giving me the time to present my testimony. I am here today to share with you, as an Ohioan and student, I am opposed to HB 318 and its sweeping rollbacks to public safety.

I was here in January testifying against this same bill while in the Senate Committee where, by the way, I was given little more than two hours to submit testimony. It was hard to imagine, back in January, what the upcoming months would bring in terms of public health in our nation and internationally. As a white woman, I have grown up where my fear of gun violence is within my school, not when I am walking on the sidewalk. Empathy is something we need to have when discussing this legislation. We need empathy when we think about how this bill will harm communities of color. It will add to the immense inequalities that these communities already face. If we've learned anything over the last two weeks it's that there is still deep seated prejudice and racism in this country. This bill, commonly known as Stand Your Ground, is detrimental to the lives of people of color. The statistics speak for themselves.

Over 26 states have passed similar legislation and they have seen negative results. This bill would allow for one to choose violence where there is a way to retreat and diffuse the confrontation. When looking at communities of color, the ones whom need the most protection, this bill will harm them due to the fact that when the shooter is white and the victim is black, the homicide is deemed justifiable 11 times more frequently. And if that information isn't startling enough, Florida saw a 23 percent increase in firearm homicide rates among black residents when Stand Your Ground was implemented .

I have grown up to be conditioned to always know the nearest exit in all my classrooms

and how I could barricade the doors to each of my classes. I constantly have this fear of someone coming into my school, favorite coffee shop, and movie theatre. In this America, students have had to come to terms with their own mortality at a young age every time there is a mass shooting, and for students of color they face this reality when they are just walking on the sidewalk. Passing HB 318 will only heighten this feeling of fear in communities of color. As legislatures, your constituents and their safety needs to be put first.

Stand Your Ground laws allow people to use deadly force in public, even when there is a clear and safe alternative. Stand Your Ground laws can make even everyday encounters between strangers very dangerous. This law creates an atmosphere in American communities that it is okay to shoot first and ask questions later. We need laws that help defuse confrontations, not laws that encourage deadly responses that may be based on misperceptions or deep-seated prejudices.

Finally, there has been no evidence that shows Stand Your Ground laws to deter crime. This bill would harm our communities, especially communities of color, and would heighten the fear of gun violence that we already see in Ohio. My generation had to confront the idea of death way too early. This is my “normal” and — just so you know — many other teenagers in Ohio feel as I do. And like me, many of them will be voting in November, and we will vote.

I want violent behavior in America and Ohio to stop, and I strongly believe that Stand Your Ground laws will not achieve that end. I want laws to help reduce gun violence, especially in communities of color. I want my Ohio legislature to become proactive in developing policies that will help to resolve the problem. The proposed Stand Your Ground law would allow individuals to use deadly force in public without any duty to retreat. This bill is a recipe for more violence, not a policy to reduce the tragic violence that has become way too common. I am respectfully asking Ohio lawmakers to vote no on HB 318. I hope I can count on you to do that. Thank you.