

House Criminal Justice Committee
Camille R. Quinn, PhD, AM, LISW
Proponent Testimony on Senate Bill 256

Chairman Lang, Vice Chair Plummer, Ranking Member Leland, and members of the House Criminal Justice Committee, thank you for this opportunity to submit proponent testimony for Senate Bill 256 (SB 256). I am Camille R. Quinn, an Assistant Professor in the College of Social Work at The Ohio State University. I am a PhD level researcher and educator with nearly 20 years of experience as a practitioner and administrator, as well as over 15 years of experience as a researcher in social and health services.

I learned that SB 256 was under consideration and wanted to offer my written support. SB256 provides timelines for board review of parole eligibility for juvenile offenders serving extended prison sentences. It abolishes the sentences of juvenile life without the possibility of parole, and it requires the sentencing court and parole board to consider youth and its characteristics as mitigating factors. The Eighth Amendment to the United States Constitution requires a juvenile sentence review procedure. In 2010, the United States Supreme Court prohibited it for “non-homicide offenses, then proscribing its mandatory application for any offense, and, in 2016, clarifying that it may only be imposed in the rare instance in which a juvenile's homicide demonstrates his or her “irreparable corruption.” Similarly, the SB 256 bill does create an exception for youth convicted of “aggravated homicide offense,” defined as the killing of three or more individuals as the principal offender. Youth convicted of this offense will not receive parole eligibility.

The research literature suggests two aspects of youth and young adult offending that must be considered: many justice-involved youth and young adults experience changes in brain development and have often been victims of violence and abuse. Further, justice-involved youth are disproportionately affected by posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), compared to youth with no such histories (Abram et al., 2013; Quinn et al., 2020; Rosenberg et al., 2014). Consequently, changes in the brain are critical for the continuous development of emotions, especially in emotionally charged situations (like those that may be cursory to delinquent acts) from late childhood to young adulthood (Casey et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2016). Furthermore, many justice-involved youth also have histories of involvement in dependency court following findings of abuse and/or neglect by their parent or caregiver. Between 9% and 29% of youth involved with the child welfare system, also become involved with the juvenile justice system (Herz, 2008; Herz, Ryan, & Bilchik, 2010). In addition, families involved with the criminal justice system are disproportionately involved with the child welfare system, and adolescents involved in both systems (i.e., dual system involvement) exhibit higher levels of delinquency (Chavira et al., 2018). Consequently, they are more likely to be arrested for felony offenses given their histories of abuse and violence exposure.

In my work with youth and families who were involved with the juvenile and criminal justice, systems also have histories of trauma and violence exposure that is associated with their law-breaking behavior. Specifically, youth and their families in a trauma center (<https://www.psych.uic.edu/research/urban-youth-trauma-center>) participated in trauma-informed interventions to reduce traumatic stress, violence exposure and substance abuse

associated with their law-breaking behavior. These findings have important implications for laws like SB 256, including the protection and treatment of youth suggesting a need for rethinking ways to meet their needs as they transition adulthood with hopes of desisting from crime in the future. Specifically, future treatment efforts should be done within a framework of healing justice, one that mandates oppression be seen as community and collective trauma, which involves an approach “that restores individuals and communities to a state of well-being” (Ginwright, 2015, p. 9; Quinn et al., 2020). I’m currently using a healing justice approach in a study I’m developing to test an intervention with adolescent girls and their parents and caregivers in Central Ohio.

I strongly encourage this committee to support SB 256 and its passage will ensure that most youth with adult sentences have the opportunity for parole review. Specifically, youth incarcerated for a non-homicide offense will have a parole hearing after serving 18 years in prison, and youth serving prison time for homicide offenses will have a parole hearing after serving 25 years. Some opponents of SB 256 suggest that the timeframe for review be substantially increased to 40 or 50 years before review in spite of some individuals who are opposed to these changes. Similar to reviews for death penalty cases, SB256 parole reviews would benefit from including records from children’s and juvenile justice services, so all collateral documents could be considered. Further, SB 256 would not automatically provide a juvenile offender release after 18 or 25 years. It would merely allow a parole board hearing to determine whether the offender has been sufficiently rehabilitated to be considered for release. This type of hearing is what the United States Constitution requires.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of SB 256. I am thankful that the sponsor reintroduced this bill and I look forward to working with all members to pass this needed framework for juvenile life sentence review. I am available to answer any questions you may have.