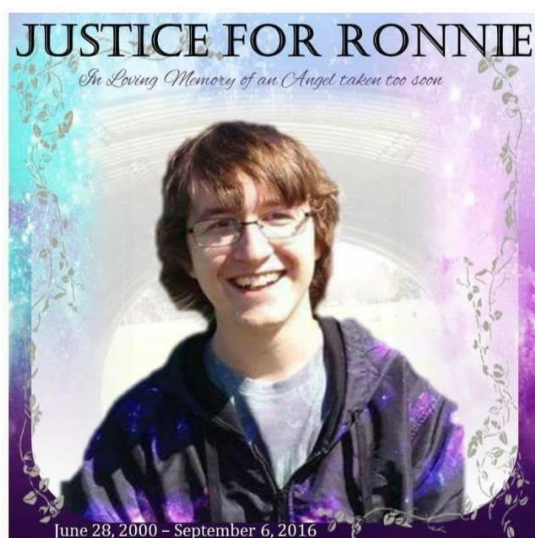


Hello, everyone, my name is Jessica Combs and I am here today to offer testimony to oppose Senate Bill 256 and share with you why this legislation is important to me and my family. I am on the Survivor Advisory Board for the Ohio Crime Victim Justice Center (OCVJC). I am also a member of the National Organization of Victims of Juvenile Murderers (NOVJM). As a homicide survivor, I am speaking from personal experience after navigating what seems like a never-ending criminal justice process.



My story begins back on September 4, 2016. That was the day a police officer knocked on my door and told me what would come to change my life forever. He had come to tell me that my 16-year-old son, Ronnie Bowers III¹, had been shot and I needed to get to the hospital. That night, 5 individuals hunted down my son and his friends as they left Alter-fest.

They found my son backing out of a driveway and blocked him in. 3 of them, all juveniles, ran up to the car and one of them punched my son in the face through the window. My son managed to back out and proceeded to drive away to safety. One of the two remaining occupants in the other car, Kylen Gregory, also 16, stepped out of the car, pointed a gun, which he stole from his grandfather and subsequently loaded with stolen bullets, at Ronnie's car and pulled the trigger. He was only 10 feet from Ronnie's car. The bullet went through the back windshield and hit Ronnie in the back of the head. My son was shot while he was driving him and his friends to

¹ <http://www.teenkillers.org/index.php/memorials/ohio-victims/ronald-bowers-iii/>

safety after being chased down by a car full of people, the majority of them juveniles. The shooter and his accomplices drove past my son's car when they left the scene. They didn't even bother to stop to check on him or to call 911. They left and tried to hide any evidence of their involvement. They just didn't care that they hurt my son, someone they didn't even know, someone they had never met.



Over the next 5 days I watched my son's condition deteriorate. The bullet entered the back of his brain and was lodged in his forehead, right above his left eyebrow. I had to sit there, helpless, while Ronnie's cerebral fluid from his brain gushed out of his nose. My 12-year-old, Ronnie's little brother, was also in the room. Ronnie never recovered, and we had to say goodbye. I was forced to bury my 16-year-old son, something no parent should ever have to do.

Next began the court battles. 3 of the co-defendants, including the shooter, were minors. 2 of the juveniles served about 6 months in a private detention center. 6 months for cleaning off each bullet, the shell of the bullet that killed my son, the gun, & hiding all evidence. Since their release, they have both been in trouble with the law numerous times. In fact, 1 was recently in a juvenile detention facility yet again. For the shooter, Kylan Gregory, I endured years of uncertainty of whether and how he would be held accountable for murdering my child.

The law had changed twice that I am aware of concerning whether a teen would be held accountable as an adult or minor for certain crimes. I quickly learned the difference between mandatory and discretionary bind overs. An amenability hearing was held to determine if the

offender would be charged as an adult or juvenile. Then the law changed, then changed back again, regarding mandatory vs discretionary bindovers for teens. This caused my family & I to endure more court hearings, and a lengthy, drawn out process. Kylen Gregory's murder trial was pushed back & once again we were left waiting.

We had a murder trial that lasted a full week, where he stood trial as an adult. On the day of closing arguments, the judge allowed reckless homicide to be added as an option for the jury, due to the offender's age at the time of the homicide. The jury could not reach a decision for the unclassified murder charge, so agreed to reckless homicide, which only carries a 9-36-month sentence. The jury found him guilty of a 1st degree felony, firing over a public roadway, and was hung on the remaining 6 charges, 4 of which were F2, assault with a deadly weapon.

We were now sent back to juvenile court, yet again, for another hearing to decide if the offender should serve as a juvenile or an adult. By this time, 3 years has passed & it was our 3rd time hearing testimony & our 68th time being in court for a hearing. That doesn't include court for the accomplices.

SB 256 advocates attempt to portray juvenile killers like Gregory as themselves being victims of disadvantaged and underprivileged upbringings. This was not the case for Gregory. He was not disadvantaged. His father was very wealthy. In fact, he was able to afford some of the best defense attorneys in Ohio. After the judge sentenced him, he said, "you're lucky your dad has a good reputation and money."

My son's murderer was sentenced to 11 years in prison with credit for time served. He appealed, arguing that he should have been sentenced as a juvenile. Because Gregory was so wealthy, he was able to afford the best lawyers for the appeals process, just as he was during the trial. The appeals process forced us to continue to relive the worst days over and over again.

My son's killer was not a good kid who was misguided and made a mistake due to his young brain. He had been in trouble many times before and has continued to show no remorse. When a psychiatrist asked him if he was sorry for shooting my son, whom he'd never even met, he replied, "I didn't kill him, God did. It's not my fault God didn't want him to live." One time, I was stuck in a hallway in the courthouse with him. He looked at me and laughed and put his fingers like a gun up to his head and pretended to shoot himself. I cannot imagine facing the murderer at parole hearings. I would have to face him again. I would have to watch him laugh at me again. I would have to be tormented by him again. He murdered my son and he would continue to murder my soul.

Since my son's murder, I can no longer work due to the amount of complex PTSD, anxiety, & depression. I have recurring nightmares, and I'm unable to go out in public by myself. I have crippling anxiety attacks. Ronnie's life was stolen from him, & his future gone. He was 16-years-old. And because of the killer's choices, Ronnie will never graduate high school or go to college or get married and have his own kids. Gregory not only killed my son, but he significantly harmed my other child. My son Jesse was 12 when he watched his older brother die. His big brother's murder caused him to struggle at school and with peers. He missed lots of school due to court dates and counseling sessions. He has also had to watch the impact of his brother's murder on his parents--the murder nearly destroyed my marriage.

Jesse is now an only child. Before Ronnie was murdered, he and Jesse shared a bedroom. We had two beds for two boys. Jesse still has the same bedroom. Only now, one bed is empty. He goes to bed every night knowing that his brother isn't there. Jesse has a hard time talking about his brother. He is now 16 years old. Though Ronnie was his older brother, Jesse has lived longer than he did. They will never raise their kids together. Jesse's kids will never know their uncle

Ronnie. I always told Jesse, “girls and friends will come and go, but you’ll always have your brother.” But now that’s gone.

I strongly oppose Senate Bill 256! We need to honor the judge’s decision on how the offender was sentenced, and not invalidate the judge’s ruling, simply because of the offender’s age. The difference in a few months in age is arbitrary and insignificant. My son’s murder was not less horrific because the killer was under 18. The devastation this has caused for our family is also not less horrible because of the killer’s age. These offenders need to serve their original sentences. A 16 & 17-year-old knows the difference between right and wrong. Their birthday does not change the facts of the case or the facts of their crimes. If Senate Bill 256 is passed, it will undoubtedly reopen emotional wounds of the victims and their families. It will also likely increase delay in other cases, just to reopen cases that have already been decided. SB 256 would lead to profound trauma for victims’ families, who have already endured the worst pain possible. Additionally, the judges reached their decisions based on an appropriate amount of time to rehabilitate, something that a blanket decision such as the one in SB 256 fails to account for. I ask that you consider the victims and the impact this would have on them.

I’d like to thank the House Criminal Justice Committee, as well as the Ohio Prosecutors Attorney Association for the opportunity to share my story on behalf of my son, Ronnie Bowers, and for other victims throughout.