

To Chairman Lang, Vice-Chair Plummer, Ranking Member Leland, and members of The House Criminal Justice Committee:

RE: Senate Bill 256

My name is Christopher Ferrell. I write this testimony with the heaviest of hearts, since the age of sixteen I have been incarcerated and known simply as inmate 272-486. I am now two months away from being forty-six. I am not going to waste any more of your time with scientific studies, legal jargon, court rulings, or words like fairness - which seems inappropriate to me. My heart is heavy because the man I have grown into understands the weight and suffering that comes with being responsible for the loss of a life, and yet, that same man would never make the choices that were once made in adolescence.

I was an abused, broken, hurt, and angry kid. We have replaced "kid" with "juvenile" throughout all of the legal jargon... a word that removes some of the reality of who you are actually speaking of - kids. Specifics of a tragedy are not relevant to this Bill, however, a very simplified version of how bad choices turn into even worse choices, how the snowball effect takes over ones young life, is in my opinion necessary here. I was abused early in my life. This left me confused and without understanding of the consequences of such intimate relationships and I fathered a daughter when I was just a child, thirteen years old. The small town I am from, this news, it brought me a whole new isolated experience. No one was allowed around me. This was the beginning of my snowball. I started to act out, primarily to gain some type of attention. The attention it brought was from older individuals, a few young adults. Looking back, I was nothing more than a toy - or a dog - to these individuals. You see, the crazier things I did, the more of a reward I would get. I was driving their cars, they were getting alcohol, and they were setting me up with women twice my age. As a kid, all of this attention, all of these things that other kids don't have... the snowball is now running down the hill collecting more momentum and becoming harder and harder to stop.

A moral regression occurred for me, just a short time before the tragedy. I went to my mother and asked to be institutionalized. Not because I was mentally deranged, or mentally impaired, but because I was trapped in my snowball. The "crazy" things we were doing with the adults got even crazier. The moral compass that was inside of me tried to grab ahold of me. This program, which would have kept me until the day I turned eighteen, would have given me the chance to separate myself from the snowball. I said goodbye to everyone. I told the adults I'd never see them again. It was an extremely hard thing to do at sixteen years old. I turned my back on everyone. This should have been the end of the story. I was in intake, and unfortunately, my mother's insurance would not cover the stay. I had no history of mental illness. I was sent back to my snowball. I was defeated. I had to face the ridicule of my return. This was just months before my snowball was completely out of control.

When I was arrested, the understanding of the gravity of my actions was not apparent to me. I was still thinking like a kid. I absolutely knew right from wrong, hence my moral regression, however, the understanding of the consequences of my actions was not there, it is the hardest thing to understand unless you have lived it - you are a kid, indestructible, and the gravity of events doesn't register "at that time".

But it does.

I'm not going to quote scientific data, as I said, so all I can say is I matured in prison. As I grew older, as the kid went away, the reality of my actions began to weigh on me so heavily I lived in a constant state of conflict within. This is the reason this Bill and these changes are so necessary. Hope. The measure of a man should never be judged by a single group of actions, but the works he accomplishes throughout his life time.

I have completed every program offered by the ODRC.

I was among the first group in the state of Ohio to get a BA in communications when the Pell Grant was made available by President Obama.

I have over 80,000 documented community service hours.

I am a TOPUCU (The Only Person U Cheat is U) facilitator. I have sent over 250 men through the program successfully.

I have cared for over 50 dogs in a love a pup program, saving them, and training them to be sent to loving homes.

I am an artist. I have been blessed to have had my work displayed in the Smithsonian Institute for a Veteran's affair. I have airbrushed a single axle trailer completely in murals for a VVA chapter, a flag drop off box for a VFW chapter, and even a wheelchair for someone I consider my personal hero and friend.

This is just a very small representation of programs completed and community service I have done. This is not to boast or brag about my accomplishments, but a testament to the truth of my seeking some type of redemption, for the overwhelming regret and remorse I have for my actions as a kid. I can not change that sixteen year olds actions. I have prayed and begged for a way - I live everyday with this regret and remorse. It has shaped me into the man that has spent most of his adult life trying to give back, trying to better others, and to change someone's life with the small chances I have been graciously given inside the ODRC.

Senate Bill 256 is important because there are children, now men, in prison who would never consider the actions they once did. The science is truthful - I have lived it. I am not that sixteen year old. I have proven that I would not be a danger to society by my institutional record. I have matured into a loving, empathetic, and genuine man under the most harsh of conditions - prison. This is what second chances are truly about.

This Bill is important so the Ohio Parole Board (OPB) will recognize the mitigating factors set forth within the Bill. I would never want to have the burden that Parole Board members have, deciding, often by feel and emotion alone, if an offender will go out and reoffend. And the burden that comes with letting someone out who does actually reoffend. I recognize this truth. I understand it. However, the entire system is set up to hinder a once juvenile offender from releasing. The system that decides your risk category is designed for adults. Juvenile offenders are penalized for not having a job, living at home with parents, and being under the age of eighteen. This is a huge risk score elevation to "high" for things that are actually decided by law. I could not work without a school work permit. I had to live at home with my parents. The courts and science has both decided that these things should be mitigating, not aggravating.

I have been parole eligible since 2008. I have seen the OPB four times, with three actual hearings. The mitigating factors set forth within this Bill have never been recognized. In contrast, my age at offense has hindered my release in every step. My decision from 2018 was clear. The OPB recognized all my accomplishments, noted my remorse, my dedication to programming, and even the fact I had numerous ODRC staff that submitted paperwork about my character and release consideration... however... "nothing you do will ever outweigh the seriousness of the offense". I was a broken juvenile, and that will forever weigh on me... but I don't want to become a broken man. It is hard to hear that everything you have become just isn't good enough. Hope... it diminishes. You hurt for the numerous people who have fought for your release, hurt for those who love you and stand by your side, and you can't do anything to keep the circle of pain from continuing. There is nothing in this world I can do to truly have redemption for my actions, however, a second chance will provide me with opportunities to heal not only the community, myself, and everyone involved, but bring truth to the fact - kids are redeemable.

I can better serve the community from outside these fences. I got my BA in communications for social work, so that I can dedicate a part of my life outside of here to juvenile offenders prior to them becoming adult offenders. I have the help from outside agencies to make this dream a reality. I have numerous job opportunities. I have a stable and incredible support network to parole to. I am blessed and humbled by all the people who are trying to help get me released.

Senate Bill 256 is necessary.

I understand that it is hard to empathize with a forty six year old man. So if you have kids, maybe teenagers, look at them... please. Would you want them to forever be known for bad actions? Would you want them to at least have a chance to grow into better human beings? To have a second chance? And although many have said, "My kid would never..." - so did my mom.

I'm not asking you to empathize with me, look at your children.

Thank you for taking the time to read this testimony in length.

Humbly,
Christopher Ferrell