

Testimony of Sara Kruzan
Founding Member, Incarcerated Children's Advocacy Network
In **SUPPORT** of SB 272
Senate Government Oversight and Reform Committee
May 11th, 2016

My name is Sara Kruzan and in 1994, I was given a life without the possibility of parole sentence plus four years. I was convicted of first-degree murder. It is an honor to be here to be able to share a little of my story, and also to put a human face to these young children who are sentenced as adults. I was sentenced at the age of 16; prior to that, I had goals, I had a 4.0 grade point average. I wrote a book about drugs and their effects. I had aspirations to be a pediatric surgeon, even though I was raised in an impoverished neighborhood by a single-parent mother who was addicted to drugs. The abuse that I endured did not really take effect until I was a little bit older. A nine-year-old child who has to endure the abuse from her mother is not able to comprehend what is happening to her, let alone be able to express the issues. From the time I was 9 until I was 16, the trauma that I experienced was so bad that I cannot even talk about some of it. I am not saying it justifies my crime by any means. I live every day with the remorse and the grief for taking someone's life, regardless of the circumstances.

However, I do understand that as children, we are faced with a lot of challenging situations, and those who come from a more challenging background, with the lack of parents and the lack of guidance, lack of understanding between morals, principles, and integrity. The decisions that I made were based more on the belief that I needed to survive or to stop the abuse that was happening to me. While I was incarcerated, I met many young people who also had the same experience as myself. Some of them were not able to handle the pressures of prison. I was in the Central California Women's Facility in Chowchilla, which is one of the largest women's facilities in the world. I was housed with seven other adult women. Being there as a child, going in weighing 118 pounds and having to share a very small space with grown women, was a trauma within itself. The lack of resources made available for those who are tried as an adult is also an obstacle for young people. At 16 years old, we do not understand the legal jargon. I just want to say that I do believe there are those who are incarcerated who, if given an opportunity to come before a board and to show who they are, they are worthy of a second chance.