

To: Senate Judiciary Committee
From: Jessica Combs, Survivor Advisory Panel for Ohio Crime Victim Justice Center
09/01/2020
RE: SB 256 Opposing Testimony

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. 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 III, 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, Kylan 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 driving him and his friends to safety after being chased down by a car full of people, majority of them were 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 is 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. Kylan 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 1st degree felony, firing over a public roadway, and was hung on the remaining 6 charges, 4 of them 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.

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.

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. These offenders need to serve their original sentence. 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. Additionally, the judges reached their decision based on an appropriate amount of time to rehabilitate, something that a blanket decision such as the one in SB256 fails to account for.

I'd like to thank the senate judiciary 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 Ohio.

Jessica Combs