

Kenza Kamal, Policy Director, Juvenile Justice Coalition
Written Testimony to the Ohio Senate Judiciary Committee
June 4, 2020



Chairman Dolan, Vice Chair Gavarone, Ranking Member Sykes, and members of the Senate Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide written interested party testimony on House Bill 110. My name is Kenza Kamal, and I am the Policy Director of the Juvenile Justice Coalition, a youth-centered organization that advocates for safe, stable communities in Ohio through healing and resources for children and families who are affected by the juvenile justice system.

I will start by reading the words of Davion, a young Ohioan incarcerated as an adult after experiencing most of his adolescent years locked up: “I went to jail for the first time when I was 11. It’s hard to get out the system when you’re in it. It has put more traumatizing effects on my life than recovering effects. The system only breaks down the mind of a teen and worsens them... When I found out how much money Ohio spends on locking us up, it made me want to cry. They’d rather punish you than help you.”

The cost he is referencing is this: in Ohio, it costs us on average \$185,303 to imprison *one* young person for *one* year. This staggering cost does not buy us a safer state, but actually perpetuates more harm and violence. Incarcerating youth is associated with high rates of sexual victimization in facilities, increased recidivism after release, a higher chance of ending up in the adult system, a decreased likelihood to complete formal education, significant barriers to employment, lower future earnings and worse future health outcomes, and continued racism, since Ohio is six times more likely to lock up a Black child than a white one. This all prevents young people and their families from being able to live in safe and stable conditions that would reduce future cycles of involvement in the criminal justice system.

Alternatives to incarceration in Ohio, like Targeted RECLAIM and the Behavioral Health Juvenile Justice Initiative (BHJJ), have demonstrated results of reduced recidivism, reduced rates of incarceration, and reduced trauma symptoms in young people, and are more cost effective; BHJJ costs on average \$5,200 per child per year. These more effective and humane approaches are funded through the Community Programs allocation, and we are supportive that this continues to be allocated over \$12 million per fiscal year. However, it is in stark contrast with the \$90-92 million per fiscal year allocated towards harmful, counterproductive youth prisons. Despite the fact that the population of youth in Ohio’s prisons has continued to drop, the state has actually increased the allocation for these facilities from the last biennial budget, rather than saving and reinvesting those dollars.

We support shifting more dollars within the DYS budget away from youth prisons and towards the community programs that we know serve kids better. Outside of DYS, we support investing money upstream in infrastructure that prevents us from inflicting the court system on youth to begin with. These preventative measures can range from doula services, to lead poisoning prevention, to education funding, and it is vital that it is targeted towards the kids and families who we are currently criminalizing and failing in the juvenile justice system, particularly low-income, disabled, and Black youth and families.

In closing, I would like to express gratitude to Chairman Dolan, Vice Chair Gavarone, Ranking Member Sykes, and members of the Senate Finance Committee for your work on this budget bill. If I can be of further assistance, I can be reached at kenza@johio.org.