

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

RE: Senate Bill No. 256 (Juvenile Lifer Reform)

In the fiscal year 2018, 94 percent of the children sent to adult court in Cuyahoga County were black according to the Ohio Department of Youth Services. The prevailing idea for transferring children to adult courts in Ohio was to isolate and nullify potential threats to public safety from the most incorrigible offenders. It was also believed that a no tolerance approach to juvenile delinquency would serve as a deterrent for other wayward juveniles. These archaic ideas and policies place Ohio amongst one of the most punitive and intolerant states, that banishes juvenile offenders to a superfluous existence.

It was the draconian criminal justice policies of the mid-1990s that created the impasse facing us today. Policies that were peddled by fear mongering and not science. Policies that exploited race and class divisions in our society, which gave rise to the system of Mass Incarceration. The facts are irrefutable. Ohio has 29 operational prisons housing close to 50,000 prisoners. Half of the prisoners housed in Ohio prisons are black. These facts are consistent with the daunting statistics, that black Americans make up just 12 percent of the U.S. population, but 40 percent of the nation's prisoners are black.

Senate Bill 256 is not about throwing a dog a bone. Senate Bill 256 is about initiating 'meaningful' reforms to curb the plight experienced by a swath of Ohioans whose lives have been adversely impacted by policies that foster disparities, mistreatment and perpetuates racial and social inequality in Ohio. Senate Bill 256 affords prisoners who have spent decades incarcerated since their adolescents a chance to demonstrate their maturity, express a sense of remorse for their aberrant behavior and a second chance (as adults) to forge a better life. Senate Bill 256 finally places science at the forefront of modernizing our approach to addressing and reducing juvenile delinquency. We know now, that children are fundamentally and distinctively different from adults. Science has exposed our errant ways.

Senate Bill 256 reverses the trend within our criminal justice system that implements a cruel measuring stick that says "a bad act equates to a bad person." Contrary to what some believe, supporting Senate Bill 256 or calling for parole reform for inmates who have spent their entire lives in prison since childhood is not a get out of jail free card. This is not about supporting criminals or putting public safety at risk. This bill only affords juvenile lifers "a meaningful opportunity' to demonstrate their growth and change and requires the Parole Board to consider certain mitigating factors that never before were afforded to juvenile lifers.

Those of us who support the passage of this bill realize the ambivalence and highly charged emotions associated with the offenses committed, the victims lost, and the families impacted. Please know that our prayers and hearts go out to every victim, every family and every community impacted by violence throughout Ohio.

To everyone present and to those opposed to Senate Bill 256. Remember that retribution is not justice and compassion is not weakness. That God's love, mercy and forgiveness extends to all of us. Become the change you want to see in others, and let us support the children we left behind by supporting the passage of Senate Bill 256. Thank you for this opportunity to be heard.