

Thank you, Chair Mariani and the representatives of the Public Safety and Criminal Justice Reform Committee. My name is Eric Li, I am a sophomore at Eagan High School. I'm here today in support of HF 922, HF 947, and HF 416 as a member of the Minnesota Youth Council. The Minnesota Youth Council is a diverse group of 36 high school students who are representatives of each Congressional district in Minnesota. We help bring the voice of youth to lawmakers striving towards equity in various areas that affect youth across the state. In the MYC, I am a member of the juvenile justice subcommittee that aims to educate the public and reform the problems within the juvenile justice system.

I see a lot of similarities between the juvenile justice system and the ways that disciplinary action happens in my school. In the juvenile justice system, there are disproportionate rates that minorities are involved, just like students that are punished in high schools around the state. Detention practices are modelled as well. For example, there are two In School Suspension (ISS) rooms that look essentially like closets at my school. Whenever you walk by that room, you often see a person alone with their head facing the wall. Most of the time those students are Latinos or African American. The teacher is usually not even there.

This contributes to the environment around the school, which feels less like a community friendly environment and more punitive. In extreme scenarios that looks like school resource officers in the building with guns. But sometimes it is even smaller things. For example, during gym class, you can get in trouble for simple things like leaving the locker room early or deviating from the track that people are running on. Again, the people often caught in these scenarios are also typically minorities. Even as a middle schooler myself, I did minor things and ended up in ISS.

The same kids that are punished harshly in our schools are the same kids who are punished harshly by the juvenile justice system. They are kids who may be on Free or Reduced lunch. They may have more stressful family lives. We need better tools, like objective risk assessments, to work with them and better data on how the programs are going, like on the extended jurisdiction juvenile sentencing.

I believe that we need to switch from the current punishment-based paradigm to more rehabilitative justice. For schools, that might look like opportunities for community service (ex: lunch duty, helping out the janitors etc). For the juvenile justice system that could also mean community service, but also counseling opportunities or therapy to get to the root causes of behavior

On behalf of the MN Youth Council, thank you Chair Mariani and representatives of the Public Safety and Criminal Justice Reform Committee for your leadership. These new laws will help create better conditions of confinement, more equitable sentencing practices, etc. that forefront a rehabilitative approach for Minnesota youth that will prevent disproportionate life-long consequences in the future. We look forward to your vote.