

5/1/2023

Dear Public Safety and Judiciary Committee Members,

My name is Avra Anagnostis. This letter will focus on the injustice of sentencing children as adults and support of SF1325. **I urge you to include the Juvenile Life Without Parole and 15-year release eligibility provisions from HF 1300 in the Omnibus Public Safety bill, SF 2909.** Before I begin, I'd like to note that I lost my six-year-old stepson due to someone's criminal behavior, and I fully support survivors and victims of crime. A person can be both an advocate for victims and an advocate for fair sentencing laws and proper rehabilitative practices. It does not have to be one or the other.

In 2001, when I was 14, my best friend Roberto Lopez-Rios, who was 16, was incarcerated for felony murder; it greatly impacted my life. Watching the horrors of my best friend being thrown into the adult criminal justice system is one of the most disturbing things I have experienced. I decided to become a teacher out of a desire to protect, nurture and educate kids. Through this, I had the opportunity to observe the brain development of the children and teens I worked with. It is soul-wrenching for any of us who understand the psyche of children, particularly hormone-ridden and impulsive teens, to think they could be held to the same standard as an adult. They are also uniquely capable of rehabilitation because their brains are so much more malleable than those of adults. We all know within ourselves that they are not the same as adults: why are we treating them as such?

We all want a safe community, no matter our political views. Why not base our justice system on those around the world that are genuinely rehabilitative and reduce recidivism? Our country is currently on the Human Rights Watch for our incarceration rate and treatment of children. This is not working.

In November 2020, Roberto and I were compelled to form Juvenile Sentencing Reform MN. I have communicated with at least 48 individuals incarcerated as children and serving 15 years or more. I have heard the stories of those ranging from those committing the most horrific murders to those wrongfully convicted. I can say that almost all are survivors of abuse unimaginable to most people. I can also say that most of these men are deeply moved to help youth in some capacity. The vast majority have proven they are not a threat to society; statistics support this. Given the right tools, imagine the assets they could be at reducing youth violence.

Roberto has served a sentence longer than many adults who committed the most horrific crimes. In 20 years, he has seen adults repeatedly returning to prison for violent crimes. Juveniles have some of the lowest recidivism rates of any incarcerated group. According to the Campaign for Fair Sentencing of Youth, it's around one percent. We cannot ignore this fact. If anyone is worthy of a second chance and a possible opportunity for release, our kids should be considered first.

Respectfully,

Avra Anagnostis  
Co-founder Juvenile Sentencing Reform MN.