

Social Justice Committee Article on the Youth Justice Oneg

As part of the Oseh Social Justice Committee's mission to educate our community, it partnered with Jews United for Justice (JUFJ) to lead an Oneg discussion on January 24, on the horrible conditions for youth in the Maryland legal system. We heard about how Maryland is the second worst state in the US for putting children in the adult prison system (Alabama is the only one worse). This is primarily because there are thirty-three offenses that will automatically send a child from 14 to 18 years of age into the adult prison system instead of starting in the juvenile justice system. This is known as autocharge. Why does it matter?

If charged as a Juvenile	If charged as an Adult
Always detained in a juvenile facility with other youth	Spends some or all of their time in adult detention facility
Multiple time limits on trial delays and reviews to ensure case is moving	Longer processing time due to longer time limits and trial delays
Usually has access to education, trauma-informed programming, and therapy throughout detention.	Only gains access to education and therapeutic programming after trial and sentencing.
During probation/after release provided with support to ensure access to education, family therapy, and other accountability programs in their community	During probation/after release provided with little-to-no support and made solely responsible for their education, support and care.

If a child, their lawyer, and/or their family believes they should be in the juvenile system, a judge must make that decision. Pending that decision, the children are considered adults and thus fall under the adult system while they are waiting. The wait times to even see a judge can be weeks or even months. Thus children who are charged, but not found guilty of any crime, are sitting in an adult cell and often in solitary confinement because the legal system at least acknowledges that these children shouldn't be in the general adult prison population. We heard a story about how one child sat in the adult prison for three weeks while her parents had no idea where she was. Because she was being treated as an adult, there was no requirement to contact her parents. Charging children as adults as been shown to result in an increase of physical violence, sexual violence, and isolation, and the loss of access to education and health benefits. 80% of the children charged as adults have their charges dropped, but the trauma and damage don't go away.

What can you do? Let your legislators know that you want the practice of autocharging stopped; that you don't want them to bend to the erroneous media claims that youth crime is on the rise, when in fact, it is still below pre-pandemic levels; that you don't want them to roll back the gains from last year where we earned the right for children to have a lawyer present before being interrogated by the police. If you're not sure who your legislators are, you can look them up [here](#). You can access more information and take action on JUFJ and the Youth Justice campaign [here](#) and on the MD Youth Justice Coalition at mdyouthjustice.org.