

SUPPORT HB 1190 - Youth Accountability and Safety Act

MARYLAND ALLIANCE FOR JUSTICE REFORM
Working to end unnecessary incarceration and build strong, safe communities



To: Chair Luke Clippinger & House Judiciary Committee
From: MAJR Executive Committee
Date: February 26, 2025

Can a teenager, who foolishly goes along with a crowd when a crime is committed, be found guilty of 1st degree murder when another person commits a killing accidentally or without planning? Under Maryland's current "felony murder" rule, the answer is "yes"--and the presumed penalty would be a life sentence.

Maryland courts don't keep track of how often this rule is used; two other states have estimated it may involve 25% of their murder convictions. But, those studies suggest a disproportionate impact on juveniles who may receive life sentences under the rule for killings they did not commit.

Scientists, as well as the U.S. Supreme Court, have recognized that adolescents often exercise poor judgment, especially with peer pressure or substance abuse. But, in a matter of years, they can mature and become responsible citizens. Modern scientific studies document that these young people are less culpable and could be rehabilitated with much less than a life sentence. The felony murder rule was adopted in England during medieval times, but has been abandoned there, as well as in the rest of the United Kingdom, Canada, Ireland – and a number of other U.S. states (including Kentucky, Ohio, Michigan, California and others).

Does the felony-murder rule provide a deterrent? One survey found that less than 1% charged with felony-murder knew of the rule before their arrest. Another study has found no difference in the crime rates of states with and without the felony murder rule.

Importantly, the Youth Accountability and Safety Act –amended to be prospective only – would
-NOT compel the release of anyone previously convicted under felony murder's "guilt by association" system;
-NOT prevent the charging and convictions of juveniles with 1st degree murder if prosecutors can prove they participated in a "deliberate, premeditated and willful" killing-- or conspired or solicited such a killing; and
-NOT prevent the charging and convictions of juveniles with 2nd degree murder or manslaughter in appropriate cases.

Moreover, the State still would have no shortage of options to seek harsh sentences, even with passage of HB 1190. Here are some examples: a) If the State proves an emerging adult participated in a robbery that included premeditated (as opposed to an unplanned) killing, a 1st degree conviction and life sentence still could result. b) Even if premeditation could not be proved, if the State proves knowing participation in a robbery with a handgun, a sentence of 20 years (robbery), plus 20 years consecutive (handgun), plus an additional 20 years (conspiracy) could result in a 60 year sentence for each victim. Compare Bishop v. State, 218 Md.App. 472 (2014). If there are two victims, the cumulative sentence again could be consecutive for 120 years; if there were three, 180 years is possible. All that is required is that the State must prove its case – rather than relying on the automatic guilt-by-association of the unjust and medieval felony murder rule.

Please give a favorable report to HB 1190 to make the most harsh provisions of Maryland law more just as applied to our emerging adults. -Phil Caroom

Please note: Phil Caroom provides this testimony for MAJR and not for the Md. Judiciary.