

M A R Y L A N D

Youth Rights & Safety Hub



Welcome to the November/December Youth Rights & Safety Hub (YRSH) newsletter! YRSH is non-political and non-partisan. We seek to educate, not advocate. We do this by sharing relevant resources and data debriefs about youth rights and safety issues in our state.

This is our last newsletter of the year! We've got lots of content for you in this combined November/December issue, so we'll get right to it. See you in 2026!

Spotlight

Maryland Needs More Community-Based Alternatives to Juvenile Detention, Not Less by Melissa Goemann

"Many Maryland counties already lack sufficient community-based alternatives to detention. More are needed in Maryland, not less. We also need good oversight of these programs to ensure that they are not creating unnecessary supervision of youth but providing a needed service so that youth can stay safely and productively in their communities. With proper management and oversight, community-based programs can most effectively assist young people and, in turn, help to keep our communities safe by reducing reoffending."

[READ THE FULL STORY HERE](#)

Eviction Prevention Improves Youth's Long Term Outcomes by David Castro and Matt Hill

"Families cannot thrive without safe, stable housing, and students confronting eviction and hazardous living conditions cannot meet their potential in school. But there is also a connection between housing insecurity and youths' involvement in the juvenile justice system."

[READ THE FULL STORY HERE](#)

December [Views on the News](#)

The lack of heat earlier this month at the state-run Youth Detention Facility (YDF)—a.k.a. The Youth Detention Center (YDC)—in Baltimore showed Maryland media at their best. So this month YRSH is highlighting responsible, informative youth justice news (instead of serving up our too-often-necessary critiques). The Baltimore Banner appears to have broken the story (congrats!), but many other outlets picked it up. Here we highlight two—CBS News (WJZ-TV) and The Daily Record—for their excellent coverage.

On Thursday, December 4, the Maryland Office of the Public Defender (OPD)—the independent state agency charged with providing legal counsel to indigent defendants across Maryland—alerted the media that the heating system at YDF was not working.¹ The result, given wintry outdoor weather, was uncomfortable low, and potentially dangerous, temperatures in living quarters for more than 60 youths detained there while awaiting trial in the adult criminal justice system. The next day, with outdoor temperatures still at or below freezing, a second OPD announcement showed education classes for youths at the facility cancelled due to the cold.²

The following Monday, December 8, at a press conference outside the building in 20 degree weather, advocates, OPD Public Defender Natasha Dartigue, union representatives from the American Federation of State, County & Municipal Employees (AFSCME), and State Delegate Caylin Young (who represents the district where YDF is located), called upon DPSCS secretary Carolyn Scruggs and Governor Wes Moore to find an immediate solution to the then-still-unresolved problem. (The Maryland Youth Justice Coalition also sent a letter about the heat failure to Gov. Moore and Sec. Scruggs.³)

Following up on the station's Thursday night breaking news segment, WJZ reporter Dennis Valera did a terrific job outlining the story and the many related issues it raised. After explaining both the immediate problem and the steps DPSCS said it was taking to resolve it, his coverage provided context to help viewers understand the broader situation. This included a statement from AFSCME president Dorian Johnson alleging that union maintenance requests "often get cast aside, unapproved, [and] unfunded..." as well as a contention from advocates that DPSCS's apparent lack of urgency for fixing the heat strengthened the case against pacing minors in adult courts and facilities, where there is far less access to rehabilitative resources than in the juvenile justice system. The segment even highlighted the recent recommendation from the state's new Commission on Juvenile Justice and Emerging and Best Practices calling for a complete end to auto-charging (state-laws that require youths to be automatically placed in the adult system if they have been charged with any one of the 33 specific "autocharging" offenses).

Daily Record reporter Ian Round covered much of the same terrain in print. The paper went the extra distance, however, by also including two additional perspectives. James Dold, of the

Washington-based Human Rights for Children, noted that many youths charged as adults enter the system as victims themselves, often of physical or sexual abuse. State Del. Caylin Young's words were even more pointed. "That ain't rehabilitation," he is quoted saying of the conditions in YDF. "It's torture."

AND ICYMI, November [Views on the News](#)

In late October, the Commission on Juvenile Justice Reform and Emerging and Best Practices—the standing body created in 2024 to oversee and enhance Maryland's youth justice system—submitted its first report to Governor Wes Moore. The report was a response to 2025 federal findings that our state was way out of compliance with the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDP), a nationwide law that limits holding young people in adult facilities and requires youth in these facilities to be kept apart from adults. When it was released to the public in early November, many in the media focused on a recommendation that Maryland end its practice of automatically placing young people accused of certain crimes in adult court without prior judicial review:

"...the clearest and most effective path to JJDP compliance and to a more justice system is to end the practice of automatic charging while retaining the option for judges to waive children's cases to adult criminal court, when appropriate." ⁴

This was not the first time this idea has been considered in Maryland. In fact, some state legislators have been trying to end or curb "autocharging" for more than a decade, and Senator Will Smith (D-Montgomery County) has already signaled he will re-introduce a bill in 2026 that would substantially reduce autocharging, but not end it altogether.⁵

Following the public release of the commission's report, several Maryland prosecutors and sheriffs appeared on WBBF (Fox45) to voice their support for autocharging and preserving the status quo. Here's what we noticed from just one of those pieces, which ran on November 11 at 1:27 pm under the headline "Maryland prosecutors push back on plan to end automatic adult charges for youth offenders"⁶.

The coverage could leave viewers confused, because it...

...fails to adequately distinguish between two different proposals

The primary focus of this segment was the commission's report and its call for an end to all autocharging in Maryland.

"Seven State's Attorneys stood shoulder to shoulder for an exclusive interview with FOX45 News on Monday, voicing opposition to the commission's first major recommendation since its restructuring last year."

Toward the end of the segment, however, the focus shifts to Sen. Smith's legislation, which

calls for a limited rollback of autocharging. Under Smith's bill, many of the most serious offenses, including murder, would continue to be automatically charged in adult court. Yet the coverage fails to make this clear:

"For now, the report is simply a recommendation. However, Senator William Smith, one of four lawmakers on the commission, pledged to reintroduce a bill to address the issue next legislative session. Past legislation he's proposed would have raised the age a juvenile could be tried as an adult from 14 to 16."

...does not acknowledge this issue concerns pre-trial procedures—not resolved cases

Whether a case is in adult court or juvenile court, the accused person is considered innocent until the resolution of the process determines otherwise. This is why, traditionally, qualifications like "alleged" are used to describe pretrial cases—as in, "The defendant is alleged to have assaulted the victim." Yet the prosecutors' statements elide this important distinction:

"They're murderers, they're the attempt (sic) murders, they're the robbers, the carjackers, the rapists, those are the types of violent crimes..."

...allows inaccurate descriptions of the facts to go unchallenged and uncorrected

This coverage relays several misrepresentations about DJS capacity and alternatives to adult charges as if they were accurate facts:

"We have DJS that doesn't have the capability or enough bed space to hold the juveniles that are there now on the system. What are you going to do with the bed space that we have? Are we going to now move these kids who are charged with, say, a murder case, let them go home. What about a child charged with rape? Are we going to now let them go home?"

System stakeholders know that most young people facing transfer-eligible "exclusionary charges"—charges that require them to be tried as adults—will be housed in a DJS facility while a judge considers their request to be transferred to the juvenile justice system. This transfer process, however, takes as much as five months, on average, to complete. Were these cases started in the youth justice courts they would be processed much faster—which would likely reduce the number of youth in DJS facilities rather than increase it. Also, the alternative to charging a child in adult court is not "let(ting) them go home." It is trying them in juvenile court.

...repeats racial biases against young people of color

The coverage perpetuates statements that falsely suggest young people facing exclusionary charges are not, in fact, children. This is a well-documented, too-common bias disproportionately applied to children of color (who, not coincidentally, make up the vast majority of autocharged youth).

"I think that what they're failing to see is these young adults, that they're not children. They are sophisticated offenders. Many times, this is far from the first contact with the justice system,"

Like everyone else, journalists may sometimes cut corners or be wrong. But the concerns cited here are not one off. Fox45 repeated variations of this story—and these misrepresentations—several more times over the course of the week:

- Later that day, Tuesday November 11, 8:04 pm – Maryland prosecutors amplify opposition to ending automatic adult charges for juveniles⁷
- Wednesday, November 12 – Sheriffs join prosecutors in opposing plan to end automatic adult charges for juveniles, and again on⁸
- Friday, November 14 – Juvenile justice reform recommendation faces backlash over data accuracy concerns⁹

The segment ends noting the reporter had reached out to Senator Smith for comment but had not heard back. While that is an appropriate step, reporters also have an obligation to do their own due diligence and fact checking.

Over the past 14 years, legislators have introduced a range of autocharging bills, and numerous commissions have made recommendations relate to adult charging. Some proposals have sought to end the practice of automatic charging altogether—as the most recent commission has recommended. Others have limited the practice. If any legislation is introduced in the 2026 session—which seems likely—we hope the media will draw the distinction. They should also perform their own due diligence and not let unsubstantiated or misleading claims go unchallenged.

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In The News

- [Locked-up children left 'extremely cold' at Baltimore facility, public defenders say](#), by Ben Conarck, Baltimore Banner, December 4, 2025.
- [Advocates speak out against "inhumane conditions" at Maryland youth detention facility in Baltimore](#), by JT Moodee Lockman and Dennis Valera, CBS News Baltimore (WJZ), December 8, 2025.
- [After Baltimore Detention Center loses heat, calls to end automatically charging kids as adults intensify](#), by Ian Round, The Daily Record, December 8, 2025.

¹ MARYLAND OFFICE OF PUBLIC DEFENDER SOUNDS ALARM: CHILDREN ENDURING EXCESSIVE COLD AT OVERCROWDED YOUTH DETENTION CENTER, Maryland Office of the Public Defender, December 4, 2025 (<https://c026acbc-bc5d-4cef-8584->

0a0bde77d83b.filesusr.com/ugd/8cb54c_79d34f4a0afb42d7949bceefc54dbc30.pdf)

² UPDATE: NO SCHOOL AT YOUTH DETENTION CENTER AS EXTREME COLD CONDITIONS CONTINUE, Maryland Office of the Public Defender, December 5, 2025 (https://c026acbc-bc5d-4cef-8584-0a0bde77d83b.filesusr.com/ugd/8cb54c_12445c13308147cddbffe2f336e7550b.pdf)

³ https://www.md youth justice.org/_files/ugd/42b2a9_572642a48d414aa1848c2403ae69f8d3.pdf

⁴ <https://gocpp.maryland.gov/wp-content/uploads/Marylands-JJDPA-Compliance-Crisis-Children-in-Adult-Detention-COMMISSION-APPROVED-.docx.pdf>

⁵ <https://marylandmatters.org/2025/11/10/juvenile-justice-commission-wants-to-stop-automatically-charging-youth-as-adults/>

⁶ <https://foxbaltimore.com/news/local/maryland-prosecutors-push-back-plan-end-automatic-adult-charges-youth-offenders>

⁷ <https://foxbaltimore.com/news/local/maryland-prosecutors-opposition-end-automatic-adult-charges-juveniles>

⁸ <https://foxbaltimore.com/news/local/maryland-sheriffs-juvenile-crime-automatic-adult-charge-youth-offenders>

⁹ <https://foxbaltimore.com/news/local/juvenile-justice-reform-recommendation-faces-backlash-over-data-accuracy-concerns-maryland>

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