



**Testimony of Liz Komar
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**Hearing on B25-291, the Safer
Stronger Amendment Act of 2023**

Before the Committee on the
Judiciary and Public Safety of the
Council of the District of Columbia

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My name is Liz Komar and I'm Sentencing Reform Counsel at The Sentencing Project and a Ward 3 resident, thank you for your time.

Last December, the Council passed a groundbreaking criminal code reform bill that would have abolished most mandatory minimums and created a universal opportunity for a second look, among other reforms.

Since then, the recommendations of the Criminal Code Review Commission haven't changed. Criminological research has not fundamentally shifted. Mass incarceration has not ended.

Why is the Council now considering regressive sentencing policies at odds with the principles and research underlying the RCCA?

We urge you to reject this bill and return to evidence-based, not fear-based, sentencing reform.

There is overwhelming evidence showing that incarcerating children is an ineffective safety strategy.

Expanding youth pre-trial detention will harm communities and children. Incarceration harms young people's physical and mental health, impedes their educational and career success, and often exposes them to abuse. And the use of confinement is plagued by severe racial and ethnic disparities.

Lengthening sentences does not make communities safer.

The bill would lengthen sentences in multiple ways, including via enhancements for a broad array of offenses committed on public transit, on or adjacent to Department of Parks and Recreation property, or against transit workers or vulnerable individuals. The scope of these enhancements is extraordinarily overbroad. Riding the metro, standing at the bus stop, walking past the pool, watching basketball in the park – these enhancements capture a broad swath of day to day life, especially for young people.

Lengthening already substantial sentences doesn't improve safety. The War on Drugs prompted the spread of "drug free school zones" where individuals faced steep enhancements for drug offenses occurring within 1000 feet of schools, and often parks and daycares. In urban areas, the outcome was that numerous overlapping areas of poor, Black, and brown communities became sentencing enhancement zones, creating a two-tiered system of justice, without public safety benefits.

Mandatory minimums are unjust and ineffective.

Mandatory minimums have played an outsized role in perpetuating mass incarceration and contributed to the disproportionate incarceration of communities of color. Creating new unnecessary firearm offenses with mandatory sentences that may be stacked on top of other sentences to make them even longer is doubling down on a failed safety strategy. Washingtonians deserve solutions, not a repeat of the 1990s.

For more information on these topics and second look more broadly, attached to my testimony are four reports: “[Left to Die in Prison: Emerging Adults 25 and Younger Sentenced to Life without Parole](#),” “[Why Youth Incarceration Fails: An Updated Review of the Evidence](#),” “[A Second-look at Injustice](#),” and “[Drug-Free Zone Laws: An Overview of State Policies](#).”