

the CAMPAIGN for the FAIR
SENTENCING of YOUTH



Children Sentenced to Life in Prison without the Possibility of Parole
About the Campaign

According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), approximately 2,500 individuals in prison in the United States have been sentenced to life without parole for crimes they committed while under the age of eighteen, and none in the rest of the world. The Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth believes that young people convicted of serious crimes should be held accountable for the harm they have caused in an age-appropriate way—one that reflects the fundamental difference between youth and adults and affirms human rights, values and moral beliefs.

- **Children are not equipped to make truly well-reasoned, mature decisions.** Research confirms that adolescents do not have adult levels of judgment, impulse control, or risk assessment. They are also more susceptible to peer-pressure than adults. The United States Supreme Court recently ruled in *Roper v. Simmons* that children thus have a “diminished moral culpability” in court proceedings due to their age.
- **Children are still developing physically, emotionally and neurologically.** Their brains—not just their bodies—are not yet fully developed. Thus, young people are more likely to mature and change over time, which makes them especially amenable to rehabilitation.
- **The majority of children receiving a life without parole sentence had no juvenile or adult criminal record.** Human Rights Watch (HRW) reports that nearly 60% of people serving life without parole sentences for crimes committed as youth had no juvenile or adult criminal record.
- **Detailed research on the use of this sentence shows that it is implemented unfairly.** There is documented evidence of systemic racial disparities, gross failures in legal representation, and many examples of youth being sentenced more harshly than adults convicted of the same crimes.
- **The United States is the only country in the world that sentences children to die in prison.** In addition, only the United States and Somalia have failed to ratify the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which explicitly prohibits sentencing youth to life in prison without parole. This practice also violates three international treaties to which the United States is a party: the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment; and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.
- **Recent United States Supreme Court decisions mark a new era for the way that we hold children accountable.** Four United States Supreme Court rulings since 2005—*Roper v. Simmons*, *Graham v. Florida*, *J.D.B. v. North Carolina*, *Miller v. Alabama*, and *Montgomery v. Louisiana*—identify youth status as a relevant factor when children face the justice system. By enacting legislation that abolishes life without parole sentences for youth, states can align local policy with these decisions.

The Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth is dedicated to replacing life in prison sentences for children with alternatives that hold them accountable in an age-appropriate ways, focusing on rehabilitation and reintegration into society.

www.fairsentencingofyouth.org