

Juvenile Justice in California Fact Sheet

Life Without Parole

Youth can, and do, commit terrible crimes, causing enormous suffering to victims and their families. When youth commit such crimes, they should be held accountable, but in a manner that reflects their age and immaturity and their special capacity for rehabilitation. Instead, California and federal law allow teens who are too young to vote, buy cigarettes, or serve on the juries they appear before, are tried as adults, and if convicted, are sentenced to die in prison as a juvenile life without parole or LWOP.



LWOP in CA Facts and Figures

- California's law permits youth as young as 14 to be sentenced to life without parole for certain crimes.
- There are approximately 260 youth that have been sentenced to die in California prisons.
- Most of the 227 were 16 or 17 years old at the time of the crime: 41% were 16 years old, and 55% were 17. The remaining 4% were 14 or 15 years old when the crime took place.
- In some years, youth convicted of murder were more likely to enter prison with a life without parole sentence than were adults convicted of murder.
- 45% of youth reported that they were held legally responsible for a murder committed by someone else.

Crimes that Can Lead to LWOP

In California, the vast majority of those 17 years old and younger sentenced to life without the possibility of parole were convicted of murder. This general category for individuals' crimes, however, does not tell the whole story. Human Rights Watch's research in California and across the country has found that youth are sentenced to life without parole for a wide range of crimes and culpability.

70% of LWOP cases in California in which a teen was acting with codefendants, at least one of the codefendants was an adult. And, in an estimated 56% of California cases of this kind, the adult received a **more lenient** sentence than the teen.

Severe Racial Discrepancies

California has the worst record in the country for racially disproportionate sentencing. 85% of youth sentenced to life without parole are people of color, with 75% of all cases in California being African American or Hispanic youth. African American youth are sentenced to life without parole at a rate that is 18.3 times the rate for whites. Hispanic youth in California are sentenced to life without parole at a rate that is 5 times the rate of white youth in the state.

A Violent Prison Life

In California, teens sentenced to life without parole are not placed in adult prisons until they turn 18 years old. When they are transferred to state prison, they serve their time in maximum security prisons among the most violent adult criminals in the state. For many, violence becomes a daily reality. 59% of survey respondents who answered questions about victimization in prison reported that they have been physically or sexually assaulted.

"Every day I grow inside. But I have no room to grow in here . . . It's lonely. You're surrounded by 1,500 people and it's still so lonely." Male Prisoner, Sentenced at 15