

Juvenile Justice in the U.S. 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 Facts and Figures

- As of May 2008 there are 2,484 persons in US prisons serving LWOP.
- There are no youth serving LWOP anywhere else in the world.
- 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.
- 59% of youth serving life without parole received this sentencing for their first criminal conviction of any sort.

Crimes that Can Lead to LWOP

An estimated 26% of youth offenders were convicted of felony murder. These are crimes in which a teen who commits a **non-homicide felony** (such as robbery) is held responsible for a codefendant's act of murder that occurs during the course of the felony. State laws do not require the juvenile to know that a murder will take place or even that the codefendant is armed.

In 11 out of the 17 years between 1985 and 2001, youth convicted of murder in the United States were more likely to enter prison with a life without parole sentence than adult murder offenders. Even when we consider murder offenders sentenced to either life without parole or death sentences, in 4 of those 17 years, youth were more likely than adults to receive one of those two most punitive sentences.



Severe Racial Discrepancies

Across the country, black youth are serving life without parole at a per capita rate that is **10 times higher** than that of white youth.

A Violent Prison Life

No one expects prison to be a pleasant place, but there is a considerable incongruity between the physical and mental maturity of young prisoners and the kinds of people and experiences they confront in prison. The **vast majority** of youth serving life without parole have had violent experiences in prison.

Andrew H., who was 16 at the time of his crime, and was the same age when he entered prison, explained that he was hospitalized after being “stabbed in the left shoulder helping a guy that I knew when others tried to rape him.”

Life without parole sends an unequivocal message to youth offenders that they are banished from the community forever, no matter how they change or grow.