

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/banning-juvenile-life-sentences-without-parole-is-good-policy>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

[The California State Assembly recently rejected a bill](#) that would ban sentences of life without the possibility of parole for juveniles. According to a study conducted by Amnesty International in 2005, the United States was one of four countries where juveniles are serving life sentences: Israel had seven, South Africa had four, Tanzania had one, and the United States had 2,500. According to the Center for Law and Global Justice and the Frank Newman International Human Rights Law Clinic, as of 2007, 2,381 U.S. teenagers were incarcerated with no hopes of release ever. As many as 60 percent of these youth are first-time offenders, and more than a quarter are convicted of felony murder, meaning that they were part of a crime when the murder occurred but didn't do the actual killing.

Young people involved in crimes are often in the company of older youth or adults and don't realize that their companions are about to draw them into actions that will have lifelong consequences. Psychological and developmental research sheds light on this aspect of juvenile crime: research has shown that adolescent brains are underdeveloped in areas associated with emotional response, impulse control, and moral reasoning, and that teenagers have a high level of vulnerability to stresses and other peer pressures. They are unable to measure the long-term consequences of their actions and seek immediate gratification, making them more susceptible to engaging in risk-taking behavior than adults. Some research suggests that areas of the human brain governing emotional response, impulse control, and moral reasoning don't mature until the early 20s, a finding borne out in teenagers' everyday behavior as well as criminal acts.

The proposed California legislation was designed to reflect what experts know about adolescent brain development and behavior. It did not propose to exonerate juveniles who commit crimes, but to provide them with the opportunity to rehabilitate themselves and reintegrate with their community.

The argument over whether it is appropriate to institutionalize young people for crimes is not at issue in California's proposed reform. The California bill is about parole, and only parole. Those considering the bill in the state legislatures' next session should understand this fact, not succumb to political pressures, and do what is right for children and society.

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