

COMMENTARY

Ending juvenile life without parole sentences to bring real justice to Wisconsin's children

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Think of the worst mistake you made growing up. Now, imagine you never had the chance to prove you could be anything more than that mistake. That's the cold, unforgiving reality of over 100 people in Wisconsin today who are doomed to die in prison for crimes they committed as children.

The United States is alone among nations in its routine sentencing of children to life sentences without any chance of parole. As Wisconsinites, we often talk about the importance of mentoring and guiding youth. However, instead of giving justice-involved youth an

opportunity for redemption, we tend to take a harsh retributive approach to justice for juvenile offenders. Many have never been given the chance to repair the harm they have caused, or given opportunities to live up to their full potential. Unless legislation currently before the Wisconsin Legislature brings this practice to an end, they most likely never will.

Twenty-eight states including Arkansas, Ohio, Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, and Texas have already banned sentences of life without parole for juveniles, putting Wisconsin in the minority of states that retain a practice the Supreme Court has ruled unconstitutional in the vast majority of cases. There's a good reason for that. As humans, our brains are still developing into our mid-to-late twenties. Children and adolescents are less equipped than adults to modulate their emotions, thoughtfully consider risks, and control impulsive behaviors. Some youth may face additional obstacles in their neurodevelopment: The BRAVE Research Collaborative at the University of Madison-Wisconsin is currently studying the impacts that trauma could have on brain development in youth, and how to empower justice-involved youth with tools that help them with emotional regulation tools and reduce mental health symptoms.

Ending juvenile life without parole is the fair thing to do. It's also widely popular, even among those who have been directly impacted – 61 percent of crime victims support shorter prison sentences and more spending on prevention and rehabilitation as compared to long prison sentences. Moreover, when individuals who were sentenced to life without parole as children have been released, a mere 1% ever recidivate; the vast majority are law-abiding, productive members of society – volunteering in their communities and working full-time jobs.

Ending JLWOP would also have a massive economic impact.

Wisconsin spends \$38,644 to incarcerate an individual per year. With 115 individuals serving life sentences since they were children, the state will spend approximately \$4.4 million per year to incarcerate a child for life. Conversely, if a child is paroled after a decade, they could contribute over \$700,000 in tax revenue over the course of their lifetime. Wisconsin's children deserve the chance to return to society – and benefit all of our communities.

There's another real cost to continuing the practice in Wisconsin. As a business leader who works with companies all over the country and internationally, I know that this practice puts a stain on our state's reputation; it's critical that we do all that we can to make our great

state an even better place to live and work by eliminating this cruel practice. As is the case with so many urgently needed justice system reforms, ending juvenile life without parole also represents a critical step in ensuring racial equity. In Wisconsin, the rate at which we incarcerate children into adulthood is double the rate nationwide. Despite making up less than 10 percent of our state's population, Black men represent over half of incarcerated individuals serving life sentences for crimes committed as children. A majority of individuals sentenced to juvenile life without parole are first-time offenders. That means we're routinely putting children – predominantly Black boys – in prison for a single act they did as a child.

Wisconsin now has the chance to choose a different approach to sentencing, one that recognizes children cannot, and should not, be treated the same as adults. Legislation working its way through the Wisconsin Legislature, [**SB-801/AB-845**](#) would abolish life without parole for children. Passing these bills will make sure young Wisconsinites can grow up to be more than their mistakes.

I want to be clear: all of us should be held accountable for our actions. This legislation does nothing to change that fundamental principle. By establishing a process to review life sentences for crimes committed as children, it does not promise amnesty for anyone. But no one should

be forever defined by their worst mistake with no chance for change – least of all our most vulnerable children.

We know that as children and adolescents' brains grow and change, they have a far greater capacity for learning, change, and growth than adults. Why do we systemically deny justice-involved youth that chance to change and redeem themselves through irreversible sentences? It's time to pass SB-801/AB-845 and end juvenile life without parole.

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