

Dear (member of the House Judiciary Committee)

I am writing on behalf of (organization name) to urge you to co-sponsor the Juvenile Justice Accountability and Improvement Act of 2009. This bill, if made law, would require reviews of life sentences given to youth (individuals under the age of 18) after 15 years of incarceration, and every three years thereafter, which is an appropriate alternative to sentencing youth to life without the possibility of parole. In the United States, there are more than 2,500 people serving life sentences without the possibility of parole for crimes committed before their eighteenth birthday. There are no such cases in the rest of the world. We oppose sentences of juvenile life without parole (JLWOP) because they recklessly disregard the differences between youth and adults and declare that young people are beyond reform. We urge Congress to pass this law to hold youth accountable, prioritize public safety, *and* protect one's human right to the opportunity for rehabilitation.

Detailed research on the application of JLWOP sentences around the country documents 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**. Despite popular thinking, a large portion (60%) of people serving JLWOP sentences are first-time offenders. In addition, more than one quarter of people serving JLWOP were convicted of "felony murder," which means they were participants in an underlying crime that resulted in a murder, but did not actually commit it, and *may not have even been present*.

Our country's juvenile justice system was founded on the majority view that children, even those responsible for grave acts, are fundamentally different from adults. The imposition of life without parole sentences on young people is especially cruel and misguided because it ignores the fact that children are different from adults in critical ways. Behavioral research confirms what is recognized by U.S. and state laws: children do not have adult levels of judgment, impulse control, or the ability to assess risks and consequences. There is widespread agreement among child development researchers that young people who commit crimes are more likely to reform their behavior and have a better chance at rehabilitation than adults. The U.S. Supreme Court agrees—in *Roper v. Simmons* the Court explained, "[f]rom a moral standpoint it would be misguided to equate the failings of a minor with those of an adult, for a greater possibility exists that a minor's character deficiencies will be reformed."

Punishment of youth should be focused on rehabilitation and reintegration into society. Enactment of the Juvenile Justice Accountability and Improvement Act of 2009 would not mean that violent people will simply be released to the streets. Instead, it will allow for careful, periodic reviews to determine whether, 15 years later, people sentenced to life without parole as youth continue to pose a threat to the community. We urge you to co-sponsor the Juvenile Justice Accountability and Improvement Act of 2009, which acknowledges the critical difference between youth and adults, and imposes an age-appropriate sentence that recognizes a young person's potential for growth and reform.

Sincerely,