

Report denounces “violation of human rights”

Thousands of young offenders in US face life behind bars

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At least 2,225 individuals convicted of crimes they committed as juveniles are currently serving life terms without parole in American prisons, according to a joint report released Tuesday by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. This figure compares with a total of 12 prisoners *in the rest of the world combined* who were given the same sentence as children.

The unique position of the United States in condemning youth offenders to lifetime imprisonment is a telling expression of the immense social contradictions and official brutality which have come to characterize American society. The fact that only 12 children received such sentences outside the US testifies to the general consensus in the rest of the world that condemning young offenders to life in prison is a brutal relic from the past. In second place behind the US is Israel, which has a total of seven juvenile offenders behind bars.

According to the joint report, entitled *The Rest of Their Lives: Life without Parole for Child Offenders in the United States*, “[O]ne third of the youth offenders now serving life without parole entered prison while they were still children, in violation of international human rights standards that prohibit the incarceration of children with adults.” In prison, these children face “gangs, sexual predators, extortion, and violence.”

Far from being on the decline, the number of Life Without Parole (LWOP) sentences for children handed out each year is soaring in the US. From 1990 to 2000, the number of such sentences rose by 216 percent. According to the report, some 26 percent of these juvenile offenders are in prison not for crimes they themselves committed, but for offenses committed by their accomplices, who are often adults.

It is no coincidence that this development has occurred during a period of deepening social and political reaction. The entire political establishment, including both Republicans and Democrats, has lurched to the right, repudiating any policy of social reform and instead embracing the nostrums of the so-called “free market.” The unbridled operation of the capitalist market and the removal of restrictions on big business have produced a massive accumulation of wealth at the pinnacle of American society, while lowering the living standards of the vast majority of the people.

This political and economic transformation has been accompanied by non-stop law-and-order demagoguery justifying executions, imprisonment without parole, and ever more onerous sentences for those who run afoul of the so-called “justice” system. The overwhelming majority of these individuals come from impoverished sections of the working class.

Meanwhile, the media and the politicians have conducted a relentless attack on the conception that crime is rooted in social conditions, and instead promoted the notion that crime is simply a product of individual character flaws—immorality, inbred criminality, etc. This Social Darwinist throwback to the darkest periods of human civilization found consummate expression in the words of former Republican senator and presidential candidate Robert Dole, who declared: “The cause of crime is criminals.”

The most vulnerable and defenseless of Americans—children—have suffered the cruelest blows at the hands of an increasingly depraved judiciary and political elite.

Fifty-nine percent of child offenders serving life sentences in the US, according to the report, had no

criminal record prior to the crime for which they were incarcerated. Twenty-six states in the US have issued edicts *mandating* adult trials and life sentences without parole for certain crimes committed by juveniles, regardless of the circumstances, and this has accounted for a majority of the life terms imposed on child offenders.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child, an international agreement ratified by every country except the United States and Somalia, proscribes explicitly giving life sentences without parole to juveniles. Amnesty International also points out that the legal systems of 132 nations other than the US bar such sentences. In the US, however, children in the thousands, as young as 13, enter adult prisons and remain there until they die.

Only days before the release of the Amnesty International/Human Rights Watch report, the *New York Times* published an article (“To More Inmates, Life in Prison Means Dying Behind Bars”) documenting the explosion over the past three decades in the number of convicts serving life sentences. In the 1950s and 1960s, when the population of inmates serving life terms was much smaller, an average of 12 such inmates were granted paroles each year. A life sentence in those days usually meant actual prison time of 10 to 20 years. There was a significant section of official public opinion that held that prison was not simply, or even primarily, a means of punishment, but rather of rehabilitation.

The population of “lifers” since then has skyrocketed to more than 130,000 (and “life” nowadays means dying behind bars), while only a handful of governors have commuted even a single sentence in the past decade. Because of this political climate, a further 7,000 incarcerated children who have been given life sentences with the possibility of parole face less chance of ever returning to their families.

Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch report that Pennsylvania has the highest number of juvenile crime “lifers,” with 332 offenders serving life terms without parole. In second place is Louisiana, with 317. Michigan, with 306 such cases, ranks third.

“Youth are told that they will die in prison and are left to wrestle with the anger and emotional turmoil of coming to grips with that fact,” the report states. “They are denied educational, vocational, and other programs

to develop their minds and skills because access to those programs is typically restricted to prisoners who will someday be released, and for whom rehabilitation therefore remains a goal. Not surprisingly, child offenders sentenced to life without parole believe that US society has thrown them away.”



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