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New Report Shows Why People Given Extreme Prison Sentences as Children Deserve a “Second Look”

Report Provides Plan to Address Rehabilitated Youth Serving Adult Prison Sentences

AUSTIN, TX — Today, the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition (TCJC) released a [new report](#) focused on *addressing rehabilitated youth who are serving extreme sentences in adult prisons with little hope of ever being released*. “Second Look: For Justice, Safety & Savings” provides a comprehensive background on the history of extreme juvenile sentencing and the extent to which Texas is a harsh outlier.

“Children as young as 14 can be tried as adults in Texas and sentenced to de facto life sentences without any opportunity for parole until they have served, in many cases, at least 40 years behind bars,” said **Lindsey Linder, TCJC Senior Policy Attorney and the report’s co-author**. “This positions Texas as a harsh outlier in the national landscape of youth sentencing, rendering its ban on juvenile life without parole virtually meaningless because the ‘remedy’ is equally punitive and extreme.”

Second Look legislation would allow for earlier and more substantive parole consideration for this population of approximately 4,000 individuals, providing a meaningful opportunity for release for those who can demonstrate that they have sufficiently matured and rehabilitated. The youth who have been given these harsh penalties tend to come from vulnerable situations where poverty, limited education, mental disabilities, and abuse and neglect shaped their lives and limited their choices. Furthermore, youth of color are most harmed by Texas’ extreme sentencing practices, with Black individuals accounting for 46 percent of those who would be impacted by Second Look legislation, despite comprising only 12 percent of Texas’ overall population.

In state after state where people sentenced as children have been given a meaningful second chance, these former lifers have proved to be remarkably successful in the free world and are evidence that keeping children locked up for lengthy prison terms is a counterproductive use of limited tax dollars. As health care costs in Texas’ prison system continue to surge — the result of an ever-aging prison population, which includes many Second Lookers — and as Texas faces a looming budget crisis as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, lawmakers can no longer afford to unnecessarily incarcerate people for decades beyond what is reasonably defensible.

“Second Look for Justice, Safety & Savings” is available on the TCJC website [here](#). A quick guide is available [here](#). A PBS documentary focusing on Second Look in Texas is streaming [here](#).

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The Texas Criminal Justice Coalition (TCJC) advances solutions and builds coalitions to end mass incarceration and build safer Texas communities. To learn more about TCJC, visit www.TexasCJC.org.

Addendum: Personal impact statements from system-impacted people in "Second Look for Justice, Safety & Savings"

- **Hannah Overton, wrongfully incarcerated in a Texas prison for seven years until she was declared factually innocent in 2015 – shares the story of her friend, Irene.** *When I first walked through those prison gates, I was scared and lonely and so depressed! I wasn't eating or sleeping. Irene looked at me and saw her younger self, a very young teenager when she entered the same prison gates. Irene took care of me, and she convinced some of her friends to take care of me, too. She helped me start eating again and get the essentials I needed. She was a friend to me when no one wanted to be my friend. When Irene was in middle school, she began being bullied by another girl. The bullying went on for years and, in high school, Irene and this same girl got into a fight over a boy. This time, Irene was determined she wouldn't let the girl bully her anymore. The fight got physical and, although Irene only intended to stand her ground, the girl tragically died. Irene, a scared teenager, was immediately charged as an adult, convicted of murder, and sent to a maximum-security prison. Irene has now spent 25 years in prison. She made one bad decision as a kid, and in the past 25 years she has grown up and matured. Irene has so much to offer the world, if she could just get a second chance.*
- **Chon, 75-year sentence at 17 years old.** *To detach myself from the infectious negativity of prison culture, I pursued an education and participated in available rehabilitative programs. To date, I have earned four college degrees (an AA in Liberal Arts, a BS in Behavioral Science, a MA in Literature, and a MA in Christian Education), a college trade (in Computer Repair), five On-The-Job Vocational Trainings, and nine TDCJ rehabilitative programs (two more of which I am currently enrolled). My prison record testifies of my transformative maturation and self-betterment, exudes my longing desire to rejoin society, and reflects my propensity for success. My survival has largely been fueled by hope of a second chance at life, and I am living proof that youthful offenders are not beyond hope or rehabilitation.*
- **Robert, life sentence at 15 years old.** *Should a child be punished? Yes, most definitely. Should a child spend the rest of his natural life in prison for his first crime ever? No. Politicians would like you to believe that giving kids life in prison acts as a deterrent, but it doesn't. Some may think or say, "After 25 years, he has finally learned his lesson." But that isn't true, I learned my lesson not long after my incarceration. Kids deserve a second chance because they are our future and we should never just "lock 'em up and throw away the key." Given a second chance, I'll be a success story and no longer just a statistic.*
- **Jermaine, life sentence at 15 years old.** *In 1994, I was charged with capital murder. Even though I was not the killer in this crime, I was convicted and given a life sentence. We as humans are destined to make mistakes. As children, we have all fallen victim to our mistakes. We have all been accused of doing wrong, and finally, in God's eyes, we are all sinners. In his eyes also, we receive redemption through his love and grace. This exists for us all. So too, our society and laws should offer redemption for those who have discovered resilience and rehabilitation out of their moment of making a mistake. Here in prison, where I compose these very thoughts, it can be hard for those of you to acknowledge my redemption. You can't read my mind, feel my heart, or see my daily walk, but somewhere in this demonstration, I hope you find my seriousness towards my atonement.*
- **Patricia, life sentence at 15 years old.** *My name is Patricia. I am currently serving a life sentence under the law of parties for capital murder. I was sixteen at the time of my arrest and am now thirty-one years old. I have spent the last fifteen years growing up in Texas prison. I dream of being able to use this experience, all that was lost, to help other broken little girls maybe not feel so broken. I want to help them love their selves so they don't make the same mistakes I did and so that they know they deserve better than what so many of us are taught to accept and settle for. Also maybe help parents realize that their children need them so much.*

- **Linda White, crime survivor from Houston, Texas.** *In 1986 my world was turned upside down. My 26-year-old daughter Cathy was brutally raped and murdered by two 15-year-old boys. Some people may find it strange that 34 years after this loss, I spend my time advocating for second chances for young offenders. Yet, my own experience has shown me that individuals who commit heinous acts as youth are capable of change. After being incarcerated for 23 years, Gary Brown, one of the two teens responsible for my daughter's death, has become a law-abiding, productive citizen. He was released from prison in 2009, though his original sentence would have kept him there until he turned 70.*
- **Juan, life sentence at 15 years old.** *One night over 20 plus years ago I made a terrible mistake, and the worst choice ever in my life. I wish there was a way to turn back the hands of time, a lot of us probably feel the same... if I only knew what I know now back then... how we can cherish life on this earth with our loved ones and be there for them, especially when they need us most. I have been in prison since the early age of fifteen—I am now 38 years old. Even though I did not kill anyone myself, I was “certified” to stand trial as an adult and found guilty of capital murder under the “Law of Parties.” My co-defendant was only fourteen—we were just two teenagers caught up, ignorant, reckless, and lost! He could not be “certified” as an adult [because he was too young] and was given a 25-year sentence in the juvenile system. I, on the other hand, qualified for certification because I was fifteen (one year older than he was) and was given an automatic life sentence.*
- **Aaron, 50-year sentence at 17 years old.** *In the throes of rage, sorrow, and youthful ignorance, I took the law into my own hands. I shot a man after he was released on bail following his arrest for the murder of my childhood friend, Omar. Several months thereafter, Omar's killer was convicted of his murder and was sentenced to thirty years. Yes, you read that correctly; Omar's murderer was sentenced to thirty years for killing him and I was sentenced to fifty years for shooting him for killing Omar. I cannot defend my act of vengeance, but even so, it is hard to fathom the injustice of these two sentences. Since the years of impetuous immaturity have faded away, I have often found myself contemplating the thoughtless decision I made at that young age and how it not only changed the course of my life, but also altered the lives of all of the people who love me. The thought seems to always linger of where we would all be in life had I not taken the law into my own hands. Would those who love me have been proud of the man I would have become? Would I have found an amazing wife to love? Would I have been blessed with children? Would I have had something greater to live for? Though there is certainty in nothing in life, the possibilities are endless of what might have been.*
- **Megan, 99-year sentence at 15 years old.** *Here I sit, now a 30-year-old woman, at the Lane Murray Unit in Gatesville Texas. In the past 14 ½ years, many things have become clear and many lessons have been learned. Among the things I've grown to see clearly is the fact that prison is not meant to rehabilitate. Prison is punitive at best and dysfunctionally abusive at worst. Somehow the children, like myself, must wade through the muck and chaos of prison to find out who we are how we'll rise above. Sadly, I've seen many young people lose their true essence to conform to the dysfunction of their surroundings. Amazingly, on the other side of the spectrum are those who, like myself, recognize the dysfunction for what it is and learn to soar. It's the second group who decide early on that we will succeed; not because of our limitations but in spite of them. Children, regardless of circumstance are still kids. Vulnerable and in need of nurturing. Prison does not solve the problem.*