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Wisconsin Sentences Juveniles to Life without Parole at an Alarming Rate New Report Finds

Black Youth Almost Four Times as Likely as White Youth to be Sentenced to Life without Parole

(Madison, WI) Even though youth crime is on the decline, the number of youth in the justice system who are serving sentences of life without the possibility of parole in Wisconsin and nationwide is on the rise, according to a report released today by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. **Sixteen** people in Wisconsin are serving life without parole for crimes they committed before they were 18. African American youth are disproportionately affected by this increase, and are 3.7 times more likely to receive life without parole than white youth in Wisconsin.

Once youth are in adult facilities, they are subject to violence and sexual abuse and lack access to mental health, drug treatment, educational opportunities, and other programs, the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families (WCCF) said. Youthful offenders in adult facilities are eight times more likely to commit suicide, five times more likely to be sexually assaulted and, upon release, much more likely to re-offend than youth in juvenile detention.¹

“Youth who have committed crimes should not get off scot-free, but locking up a child and throwing away the key without any hope of redemption goes too far. We need a system that helps youth who have committed crimes get better, not worse,” said Charity Eleson, Executive Director of WCCF.

U.S. courts repeatedly have recognized the differences between adults and young offenders, most recently in a 2005 Supreme Court decision abolishing the death penalty for juveniles. Today’s report notes that neuroscientists have uncovered dramatic differences between the brains of adolescents and adults, showing that the portion of the brain which allows a child to control impulsive behavior and understand the long-term consequences of that behavior are not fully developed until the late teen years. These findings suggest that states like Wisconsin should re-examine their sentencing laws to ensure that children are treated in developmentally appropriate ways within the juvenile justice system.

“This focus on punishment rather than on rehabilitation means that we are preventing youth from getting the services they need to become contributing and law-abiding citizens,” said Eleson. Wisconsin has pending legislation, AB 82, which would raise the age of adulthood for criminal prosecution back to 18, bringing Wisconsin in line with 35 other states.

¹ Washington, DC-based Coalition for Juvenile Justice

WCCF called on policymakers to reform Wisconsin's juvenile justice system so that the focus is on getting youth ready to rejoin their communities and become responsible adults. This includes integrating drug treatment, mental health services, education and job training into the juvenile justice system and ensuring that youth are linked to mental health, education and other services when they exit detention, so that these youth can rejoin and become contributing members of their community.

The Human Rights Watch-Amnesty International report, *The Rest of Their Lives: Life without Parole for Child Offenders in the United States*, can be viewed at <http://hrw.org/reports/2005/us1005/>
<http://www.amnestyusa.org/countries/usa/clwop/>

State-by-state data appears at page nine of the Executive Summary.

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