

THE PROBLEM

Life without parole is an inhumane punishment that no one deserves, but—as of December 2018—over 53,000 incarcerated people are serving life without parole in U.S. prisons. Unlike other prison sentences, life without parole eliminates the possibility of release. In practice, it is another kind of death sentence—one that means a slow death in prison and a likely shortened lifespan: each year of incarceration reduces a person’s life expectancy by two years.

Life without parole is also a racial equity issue. As is often the case in the criminal legal system, people of color are disproportionately sentenced to life without parole, making up 67.5 percent of those sentenced to life in 2016. Moreover, in 2018, Black Americans made up two-thirds or more of people sentenced to life without parole in nine states: Illinois, Georgia, Louisiana, Maryland, Michigan, Mississippi, New Jersey, and South Carolina. Life without parole is a punishment that takes young people of color and permanently separates them from their communities. And it’s getting worse: between 2003 and 2016, life without parole sentences increased by 59 percent.

THE SOLUTION

Life without parole sentences contribute to mass incarceration. In 2020, there were a total of 2.3 million incarcerated Americans in a prison system that costs taxpayers approximately \$80 billion a year. Life without parole sentences exacerbate this issue by making it impossible for a portion of the prison population to ever see freedom, even if their continued incarceration is unnecessary. But it doesn’t have to be this way. By eliminating life without parole sentences, we can make the legal system more just and shrink a criminal legal system that has grown out of control since the 1970s.

1. Ask your state legislators to eliminate life without parole as a sentencing option.
2. Do your research on judges with a record of handing down life without parole sentences. While legislatures usually determine whether LWOP is an available sentencing option, judges often have the final say in sentencing for a given case. In many states, judges are elected to their positions by the public.

Everyone deserves a second chance. It’s up to our generation to make sure that everyone gets it.

HOW YOU CAN GET INVOLVED & TAKE ACTION

Use our tool to call on your legislator to shrink the criminal legal system by reclassifying some felonies as misdemeanors and rethinking which actions should be considered crimes. Your elected state officials control a large portion of what causes mass incarceration PLUS they can determine how this system operates. Changing state laws and policies can reduce the number of people who go into the criminal legal system and mitigate the harms of those already involved with the system. Tell lawmakers you demand action.

