

# New study provides first nationwide window on juvenile 'lifer' population

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More than 2,900 minors have been given juvenile life-without-parole sentences since the first was meted out in the late 1940s. Now, a [new study](#) published in the *Journal of Criminal Justice* provides the most comprehensive picture to date of this unique subset of incarcerated people across the United States.

The open-access study originated with Laura Abrams, a professor of social welfare at the UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs, tasked with leading an extensive national study of young people who are ultimately given a chance at freedom after having been sentenced to life in prison.

The study is the first to supply concrete numbers and a full demographic profile of the juvenile "lifer" population and includes information on resentencing and release statuses, plus other key outcomes, such as mortality and exonerations.

In the United States, harsh sentences for people under the age of 18 who were convicted of violent offenses increased dramatically with tough-on-crime policies in the 1980s and 1990s. More recently, two U.S. Supreme Court rulings, known as the Miller (2012) and Montgomery (2016) cases, have found mandatory life sentences for minors unconstitutional, which has led to the resentencing and subsequent release of many.

Since the rulings, more than 2,500 individuals have been resentenced and more than 1,000 have been released, the research team found.

"We are looking at this group as a [case study](#) to look at [positive outcomes](#) of resentencing that may eventually be applied to other lifers," Abrams said. "We have a unique group based on their age of conviction, but our research is relevant to second chances and resentencing laws and policies writ large."

Abrams noted that more than half of all current U.S. prisoners are serving sentences of 10 years or more. Consequently, the study has the potential to inform policies related to prisoners serving long sentences and the thousands—1 in 7—currently serving life terms.

**More information:** J.Z. Bennett et al, In the wake of Miller and Montgomery: A national view of people sentenced to juvenile life without parole, *Journal of Criminal Justice* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2024.102199](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2024.102199)

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