



HUMAN
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WATCH

**“I JUST
WANT TO
GIVE BACK”**

The Reintegration of People
Sentenced to Life Without Parole



Gabby S. was sentenced to life without parole. After more than 20 years in prison, her sentence was commuted by the governor of California. She earned release through a parole hearing and was deported to Mexico. Ensenada, Mexico.

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“I JUST WANT TO GIVE BACK”

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A man with short dark hair, wearing a blue and grey striped sweater and dark jeans, is sitting on a large, weathered tree stump. He is looking off to the left, towards a hazy city skyline in the distance. The background is filled with green trees and a clear sky. The overall mood is contemplative and hopeful.

“As a child, they said I didn’t have any human good in me. They said I was incorrigible. I proved them wrong. I’m proud of that.”

Tobias T., formerly sentenced to life without parole, released after spending 28 years in prison

Ruben R.

was sentenced to life without parole for a crime he committed when he was 17 years old. Changes in law gave him the chance to go before the parole board, and he was found eligible for release. After coming home, Ruben taught himself carpentry skills, became a property manager, and worked part-time for a non-profit organization. In his spare time, he has gone back into prisons as a volunteer speaker, encouraging people to choose a path of self-improvement. Los Angeles, California.

“While life without [parole] is a terrible thing for those of us who receive the sentence, it is far worse ... for society to come to the conclusion that a human being can't be better than they were at their worst moments.”

Kenneth H., formerly sentenced to life without parole, released after spending 38 years in prison

SUMMARY

When Jarrett Harper was sentenced to life without the possibility of parole in May 2001, the judge's final words framed the incomprehensible. He remembers the judge looking down at him from the bench. Although tall for his age, he felt himself shrinking as the judge spoke, telling him that he was irredeemable, that he would never walk freely in society, and that he would die in prison.¹ For tens of thousands in the United States who have been sentenced to prison for the remainder of their natural lives, a similar message has been conveyed: You are beyond redemption, broken beyond repair, and society is better off without you.

But the judge was wrong about Jarrett. While he had committed murder, he certainly was not irredeemable. Though he had no hope of ever being released, he was consumed with remorse and transformed his life. He became a leader inside of prison, dedicating himself to helping the men around him embrace goodness and become future contributors.

Then the unexpected happened. Through a rare gubernatorial commutation, Jarrett returned to society, and what he is doing with his second chance defies all notions of life without parole (LWOP) as a sentence for the irredeemable. Since being released in 2019 after serving 20 years in prison, Jarrett has gone on to work for a social impact group as a criminal legal system and foster care reform advocate. He is also a new father, an active member of his church, and a mentor to youth in the community.

And he is not the only one.

In recent years, less than 4 percent of people sentenced to life without parole in California have been released due to changes in state law and executive power. At the time research began, there were only 143 people who fit this description. This report focuses on the historic release of these individuals and examines the positive contributions they have made with their second chances.

Using statistical data from the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation and qualitative data from a series of interviews conducted with individuals formerly sentenced to LWOP in the state of California, this report sheds light on the positive impact these people can have on society. Notably, the interviews were conducted with 110 out of the 143 individuals who had been released, representing approximately 77 percent of the total population. This comprehensive sample reinforces empirical research suggesting that LWOP sentences are unnecessary when it comes to promoting public safety. Moreover, it contends that LWOP sentences are counterproductive to public safety because they deprive communities of the unique and valuable contributions individuals with the sentence can make.

Robert S.

was sentenced to life without parole for a crime he committed when he was 18 years old. He spent 31 years in prison and was granted a gubernatorial commutation. After being found suitable for parole, he returned home where he now volunteers at a nursing home and offers bible studies in Castro Valley, Woodside, California.

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Jarrett H.

Jarrett H. speaks about his role as a social justice advocate. Los Angeles, California.

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Jarrett’s childhood was marked by years of physical, mental, and sexual abuse. Looking back on his life, he feels like the abuse started before he was even born. His mother, who lacked access to adequate support and mental health services, was raped multiple times, including while in a psychiatric hospital. That is when Jarrett was conceived.

Placed into foster care at 17 months old, he was first sexually abused when he was six years old. He was starved, he was beaten, and as he was shuttled from one foster home to another, he became a runaway. By the time he was incarcerated as a teenager, he had spent time in 48 different foster homes.

Outside of the foster care system, he found someone who appeared to care for him. A neighborhood man who helped kids fix their bikes took Jarrett under his wing. He became a surrogate father figure. But even this relationship turned abusive, and the man Jarrett had come to trust began to sexually abuse him. Initial acts of kindness became years of sexual abuse. When Jarrett turned 13, the abuse ended, but soon after, the man began sexually abusing Jarrett’s younger brother, who was also in foster care.

Years of abuse and neglect turned into anger. “I lashed out. I became a destructive and violent child,” Jarrett reflected. “I broke things to release the anger and frustration that resided inside of me.”

When he was sixteen, that anger and violence reached its peak. He killed the man who had abused him and his little brother. Jarrett was prosecuted as an adult and sentenced to life without the possibility of parole plus ten years. He remembers the judge telling him that he was irredeemable, that he would never walk freely in society, and that he would die in prison.

But Jarrett decided to not allow a life sentence to define him. “I knew that I was more than my worst act. I knew that I had to do more than just exist inside of prison, so I worked on myself.” Through self-help groups and spiritual transformation, he began to understand where his anger, confusion, and violence came from. He came to realize that the trauma he had experienced as a child shaped his behavior in ways he couldn’t fully comprehend at the time. “I forgave myself and then worked to find out why I was so angry.”

And then, he began to help others. “I had to do more than just heal. I had to help people.” He turned his efforts towards learning, reading books, and designing programs in prison to assist the men around him who would eventually be released. He started a self-help group for men in prison who had experienced sexual abuse as children. “I wanted my legacy to be more than an irredeemable foster youth.” When his sentence was commuted and he was paroled, he left prison intent on creating positive change in the world. And that’s just what he’s done. “I came home, and I became a mentor. I became an advocate.” Jarrett regularly volunteers with Vista Del Mar Child and Family Services where he mentors foster youth involved in the criminal legal system. He is also the founder of Better Days, an organization dedicated to ending the foster care-to-prison pipeline.

BACKGROUND

The Rise of LWOP

Over the past 30 years, the United States’ use of the sentence of life without parole has increased exponentially.² Between 1992 and 2021, the number of people sentenced to LWOP in the United States grew from 12,453 to 55,945, a staggering 350 percent increase.³ Though LWOP has been a feature of the US penal system for over a century, the massive increase in its use is a recent phenomenon.⁴

The meaning of the sentence has changed dramatically over time as well. Life without parole is the most severe punishment possible short of the death penalty. For some who experience it, it can even appear harsher than the death penalty, as reflected in characterizations of the sentence as the “slow death penalty” or “death in slow motion.”⁵ As one interviewee noted, “LWOP is a death sentence. We don’t go to the gas chamber or electric chair. Time is our executioner, and it is worse than being on death row because you deteriorate—whether you lose your mind or get sick.”⁶

However, the sentence was not originally intended as death in slow motion. Instead, for most of the 20th

century, people sentenced to life without parole in the United States maintained a reasonable possibility of release.⁷ In other words, life without parole more closely resembled what is currently referred to as “life with parole.” The sentence began changing in the 1970s and 80s as state and federal legislators adopted “tough-on-crime” laws that spurred the era of mass incarceration.⁸ This punitive expansion of the sentence—in scale and scope—is a historical anomaly.

The widespread use and evolution of the sentence has also made the US an international outlier. Life without parole sentences are virtually unheard of in the rest of the world, and the US holds a shocking 83 percent of the world’s LWOP prisoners.⁹ Additionally, in complete disregard of international human rights standards, the US is the only country that subjects youth under the age of 18 to the sentence.¹⁰

Criminologists and sociologists have analyzed LWOP sentences and found various harms, unintended consequences, and arbitrary features in its use. It exacerbates racial injustices, induces unsustainable financial burdens on the criminal justice system, and fails to account for the “aging out” of criminal behavior.¹¹ Despite these criticisms, the use of the sentence has continued to skyrocket.¹²



Abraham P. was sentenced to life without parole for a crime he committed when he was 18 years old. After 23 years in prison, he went through the parole process and was released. Since coming home, he has had several jobs, including in construction and with non-profit organizations providing reentry services and policy advocacy. Los Angeles, California.

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Arguments Used in Support of LWOP Sentences

Arguments in support of life without parole sentences tend to fall in one of three categories: LWOP as a means of retribution, deterrence, or incapacitation.

The retributive framework focuses on the past, arguing that people should be punished and suffer for harm they have caused without regard for whether they continue to pose a risk to another person or society. It is an “eye for an eye” or “take a life, lose your life” philosophy.

On the other hand, incapacitation or deterrence arguments are more forward-looking and focus on preventing future harm. Proponents of incapacitation believe LWOP protects the public by ensuring that a specific individual will never harm again, while deterrence theory suggests that due to the severity of the sentence, LWOP can discourage others from committing similar offenses.

Of these three arguments in favor of LWOP, the incapacitation argument may be the one most embraced. Some researchers conclude that, “without a doubt, the principal argument for LWOP is the protection that it offers to society from dangerous offenders. Its main appeal is that it guarantees that offenders will be permanently incapacitated.”¹³

While retribution arguments are largely philosophical and cannot be proven or disproven, incapacitation and deterrence arguments can be evaluated empirically. For instance, extremely low recidivism rates among people with life sentences who were convicted of murder suggest that these individuals do not pose a significant threat to society.¹⁴ Additionally, most evidence suggests that harsher punishments do not have a stronger deterrent effect.¹⁵

The detailed accounts of the individuals formerly sentenced to LWOP outlined in this report supplement a growing body of evidence suggesting the sentence of LWOP is an ineffective and even harmful tool for crime reduction. Recidivism data on these individuals in California in conjunction with interviews exploring how they live their everyday lives show that not only are they safe additions to the community, but they are contributing in important and positive ways.

Paul B. was sentenced to life without parole for a crime he committed at age 17. Due to law changes, he had a parole hearing that led to his release after over 25 years in prison. He is now a youth advocate and certified drug and alcohol counselor. He is also an appointed commissioner to the San Mateo County Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Commission where he authored a resolution that the commission passed unanimously. This resolution affirms the importance of not prosecuting children as adults and prioritizes settings that provide access to mental health treatment where their developmental and behavior health needs can be met. Woodside, California .

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RESOLUTION NO. _____
BOARD OF SUPERVISORS, COUNTY OF SAN MATEO, STATE OF CALIFORNIA

RESOLUTION DIRECTING THE COUNTY TO ESTABLISH A COMMITTEE TO EXAMINE YOUTH FACILITIES AT JUVENILE HALL AND MAKE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A MORE CARING ENVIRONMENT AT THE YOUTH SERVICES CENTER
RESOLVED, by the Board of Supervisors of the County of San Mateo, State of California, that
WHEREAS, youth in the juvenile justice system have experienced disproportionate amounts of childhood trauma in their lives, both in and outside of the juvenile justice system, and are dealing with mental health and substance abuse issues, which, if unaddressed, will likely prevent them from leading healthy and productive lives; and
WHEREAS, if the trauma, mental health and substance abuse issues of justice-involved youth are not addressed, these youth are more prone to re-offend, and increasingly serious work; and
WHEREAS, youth in the San Mateo County (County) are sentenced at the San Mateo County Youth Services Center (YSC)

LWOP in California

More than 5,000 of the nearly 56,000 men and women sentenced to LWOP in the US are in California—the third most of any US jurisdiction.¹⁶ California was among the first states to impose LWOP for non-homicide offenses, and in recent years, use of the sentence has increased at an astronomical rate.¹⁷ Between 2003 and 2016, crime categorized as violent in California decreased by 26 percent, yet the number of people sentenced to LWOP rose by over 280 percent.¹⁸ Striking racial disparities have also been heavily documented—for instance, despite accounting for only 5 percent of California’s population,¹⁹ 35 percent of people serving life without parole sentences in the state are Black.²⁰

However, in the past 10 years, around 200 people sentenced to LWOP in California have, improbably, secured release.²¹ These individuals fall into one of two categories—those sentenced for crimes committed when they were under the age of 18 and those sentenced for crimes committed when they were 18 or older.²²

The first category of people—youth who were under age 18 at the time of their crimes—benefited from a dramatic shift in public awareness and jurisprudence about adolescent development. California legislation, along with national and state court rulings, began to recognize the inherent injustice of sentencing children to LWOP and

moved the state towards eliminating the sentence for this young demographic.²³

In 2012, California enacted a law permitting people sentenced to LWOP for crimes committed when they were children to petition a court for review of their sentence. Commonly referred to as a “second look” law, this review gave judges the discretion to consider factors of youthfulness and a person’s growth and rehabilitation. It also allows for the possibility of a new parole-eligible sentence.²⁴ It was the first law of its type in the nation, and other states have emulated it.²⁵

That same year, in *Miller v. Alabama*, the US Supreme Court held that mandatory LWOP sentences for youth under 18 were unconstitutional, with a holding based on common sense and scientific research that “[b]ecause juveniles have diminished culpability and greater prospects for reform ... ‘they are less deserving of the most severe punishments.’”²⁶ State court opinions and other legislation followed.²⁷ Now, youth under 18 years old sentenced to LWOP in California receive a second look at their sentence and are eligible for parole hearings under the state’s Youth Offender Parole law.²⁸

The second group—those who were 18 or over at the time they committed the crime for which they were convicted—were released through a commutation process, court action in their cases, or changes in law. The California Constitution gives the governor the power



Louie B.

was sentenced to life without parole for a crime he committed when he was 16 years old. After 25 years in prison, changes in law allowed him to have a parole hearing that led to his release. Since coming home, he has interned at NBC Universal and worked with animals at Paws for Life K9 Rescue. Here he holds a glass award from a leadership training he completed upon release. Cypress, California.

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to grant commutations, which reduce the punishment for a crime.²⁹ In the case of LWOP, this reduced sentence is typically life *with* the possibility of parole. Commutations, however, are extremely rare, and in the last 10 years, fewer than 200 of the over 5,000 people sentenced to LWOP have had their sentences commuted.³⁰

In both groups, individuals are not guaranteed release. Instead, they become eligible for a parole hearing where they are required to meet a set of arduous standards to



Brandi T.

had served 23 years of a life without parole sentence when her sentence was commuted by the governor. She has chosen to work with people who are unhoused and is a site director for Five Keys, a Bay Area organization. Woodside, California.

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be declared suitable to return to the community. This report reflects the experiences only of the individuals who have been granted release. It documents their unique and invaluable contributions to society while also highlighting the wasted potential that comes with sentencing people to die in prison. Ultimately, it examines how they have reintegrated and what they have done with their second chance.



Bradley A.

and his wife, Lovie, met when they were eight years old. Bradley was later sentenced to life without parole but released after the governor commuted his sentence and a parole commission granted him parole. He started a dog training business where he specializes in training service dogs and volunteers in hospitals by taking his service dogs to visit with patients. Cypress, California.

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METHODOLOGY

This report is based on interviews of 110 of the 143 individuals who were formerly incarcerated under LWOP sentences and subsequently released in the state of California, analysis of data from the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) and other research. Interviews were conducted in two phases between May and November 2021.

Human Rights Watch staff trained 24 Stanford University graduate students to conduct interviews using some form of telecommunication, including phone calls and voice calls through various online applications. Students were trained on interview standards, including ensuring privacy, obtaining informed consent, taking and securing accurate notes, and minimizing re-traumatization.

A survey response collection system and script were used to ensure uniformity of questions and consistency in recording answers across all interviews. Survey questions included a mix of demographic, closed-ended, and open-ended questions to allow respondents to self-report their experiences of reintegration. Information about respondents’ daily lives was based on self-perception, and any narrative answers were recorded verbatim. We hope these accounts will provide a baseline for future research on reintegration after long-term incarceration.

Interviewees were informed of the purpose of the interview, its voluntary nature, the ways in which the information would be used, and each provided oral consent to be interviewed. Interviews took anywhere from 45 minutes to two hours. Respondents were offered a US\$50 honorarium in recognition of their time at the start of the interview. They were additionally informed that they could stop the interview at any point, for any reason, and that completion of the interview was not required to receive the \$50 honorarium. Some declined the gift card. At the end of each interview, the interviewee was offered the option of being connected with mental health services.

Human Rights Watch identified interviewees through the development of an in-house classification system based on publicly available information from the CDCR and the Office of the Governor of the State of California. Staff members carefully documented and tracked all instances of individuals sentenced to LWOP who received a commutation or became eligible for parole due to changes in law. At the time of interviewing, approximately 143 individuals were granted parole through one of these mechanisms. Human Rights Watch attempted to contact all 143 and successfully contacted the 110 interviewed for this report.



Eric C. was formerly sentenced to life without parole and now works for the Boundless Freedom Project, a faith-based organization that offers Buddhist services and mindfulness programs to people inside of prison as well as to returning citizens. Woodside, California.

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DEMOGRAPHICS

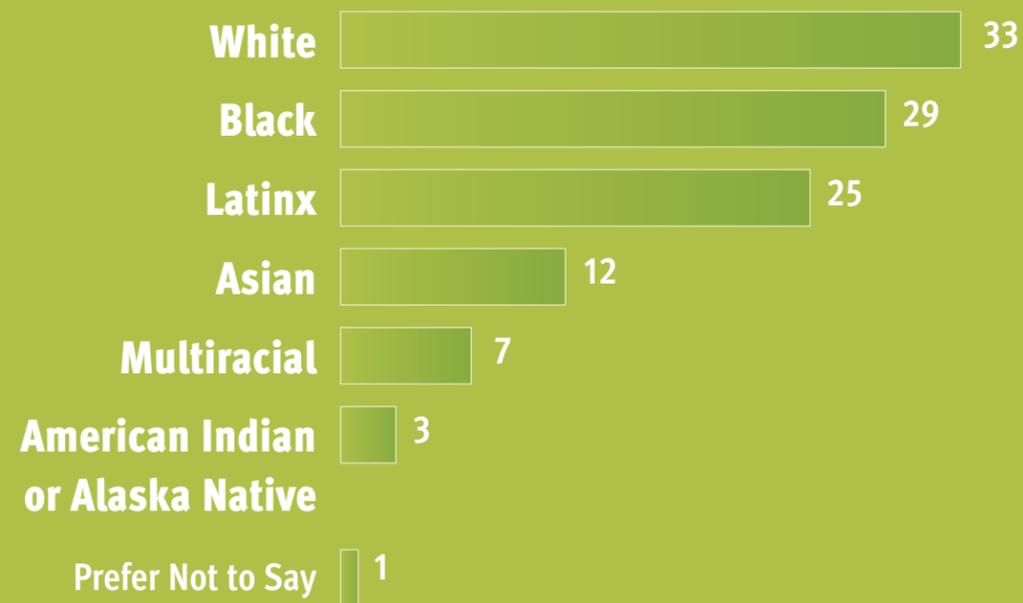
Gender and Race

We received responses from 110 people, including 88 men and 22 women, almost all of whom spent decades in California prisons before being released.³¹ All were convicted in California, sentenced to state prison, and ultimately released from a California institution.³² At the time of the interviews, the respondents represented approximately 77 percent of the total population of individuals formerly sentenced to LWOP who had since been released in the state of California.

Of the respondents, 30 percent identified as white, 26 percent as Black, 22 percent as Latinx, and 11 percent as Asian, with the remaining 10 percent identifying as either multiracial, American Indian/Alaska Native, or preferring not to say.

Human Rights Watch interviewed approximately of all **77%** individuals formerly sentenced to LWOP who had since paroled in the state of California

Race/Ethnicity of Survey Respondents



Source: Human Rights Watch survey of 110 individuals sentenced to LWOP in California who have been released.

Location and Living Arrangements

Ninety percent of respondents lived in California at the time of the interview while four individuals lived in other states and the remaining eight lived outside of the US.

Nearly half of the respondents rented their own home or apartment, in some cases with several roommates. Another 10 percent owned a home. Although below the average homeownership rate in California, this is a remarkable statistic considering the high cost of living in California and the financial barriers to reentry for a group that, on average, has spent the past 26 years in prison.³³

About one in five lived in transitional or re-entry housing. As one example, Rosemary D., who spent over 33 years in prison, now lives in a first-of-its-kind transitional housing program. "I am part of a new program called 'Home Free' for domestic violence survivors who have spent time in prison," said Rosemary. "It's a six-unit facility with two women to an apartment, so I live with one other lady."³⁴ The remaining fifth lived with family or friends, like Susan B. who told Human Rights Watch: "I currently live with ... one of my daughters and my son-in-law."³⁵

Education Since Release

Respondents reported the following on their educational endeavors since release:

3 earned an associate's degree

6 completed a bachelor's degree

30 were taking college courses

Work

26% reported working 20-40 hours per week

52% reported working more than 40 hours per week

Contributing to Community

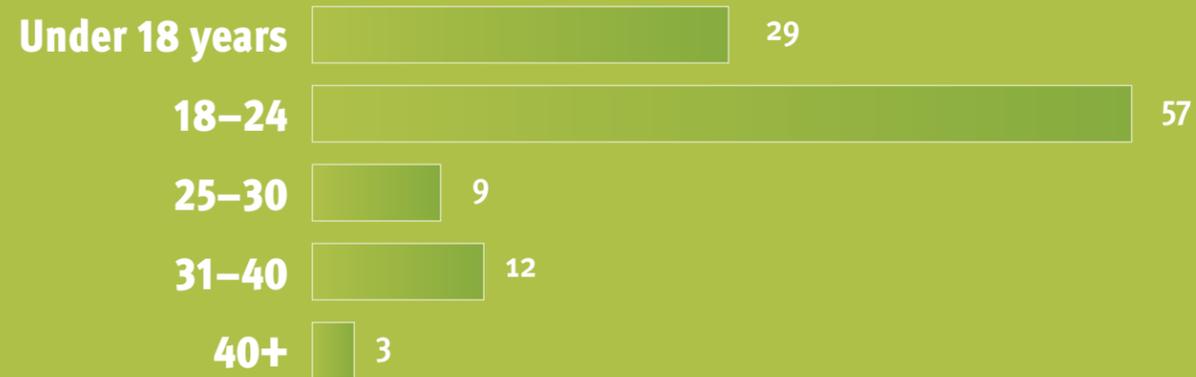
70% said they have stepped into a healthy adult role in the life of a young person

84% reported financially assisting other people since being released from prison.

94% reported volunteering with charities, community organizations, or nonprofit organizations since release.

Age at the Time of Offense

Number of Respondents Grouped by age at the Time of Their Offense



Source: Human Rights Watch survey of 110 individuals sentenced to LWOP in California who have been released.

Age at the Time of Crime and Years in Prison

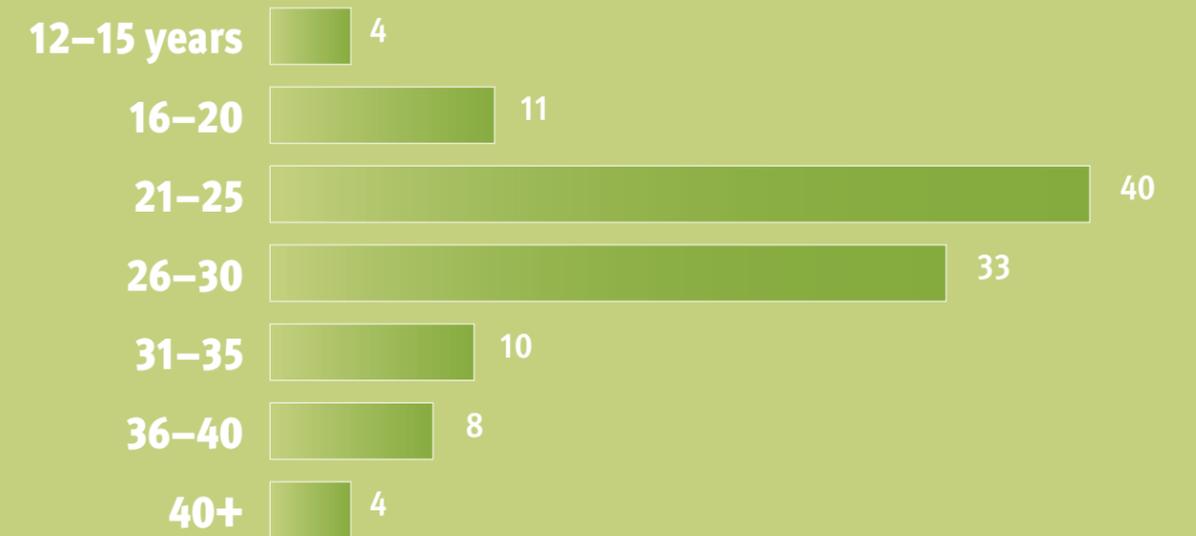
About a quarter of respondents were under the age of 18 at the time of the offense that resulted in life without parole. Eighty percent were age 24 or younger. These demographics roughly correspond to the population of individuals sentenced to LWOP as a whole. The majority of people sentenced to LWOP were young at the time of their crimes—a fact consistent with developmental brain science and empirical studies on “aging out.” This research suggests that most individuals are at highest risk of committing crime through the age of 25, after which there is a steady decline.³⁶

Release from prison after an LWOP sentence is also a relatively recent phenomenon. Approximately 75 percent of respondents were released between 2019 and 2022, and only one respondent was released prior to 2014.³⁷ This reflects the changes in law and the unprecedented use of commutation powers by California governors starting in 2011.³⁸

Ninety-one percent of respondents spent between 20 and 42 years in prison before being released. About half of the respondents were in their 40s and about 20 percent were over the age of 61 when interviewed. While beyond the scope of this report, age is an important factor to consider in future analyses of the cost and effectiveness of LWOP sentences. Not only does the cost of incarcerating people who are older increase exponentially,³⁹ but the likelihood of criminal behavior significantly decreases as a person gets older.⁴⁰ The testimonies of the individuals surveyed for this report call into question the rationale of continuing to incarcerate individuals who no longer pose a threat to public safety.

Years Spent in Prison

Number of Respondents



Source: Human Rights Watch survey of 110 individuals sentenced to LWOP in California who have been released.

RECIDIVISM

Human Rights Watch requested recidivism data on every person released from an LWOP sentence at the time of the survey. The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) was able to provide information on convictions for misdemeanors and felonies within three years of release for those released between 2011 and 2019, accounting for 87 percent of total LWOP releases at the time. Of those 125 people, four were subsequently convicted of a crime: one felony, one drug/alcohol misdemeanor, and two “other” (e.g. non-person/non-property/non-drug) misdemeanors.⁴¹

These findings align with extensive research on recidivism rates that suggest people convicted of homicide and other crimes categorized as violent are unlikely to reoffend after release from long-term imprisonment.⁴² For instance, according to a 2022 report from the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR), only two percent of individuals who were released from California correctional facilities following completion of a life with the possibility of parole sentence in fiscal year 2017-2018 were convicted of a new crime within three years of their release.⁴³ Similar data from the US Bureau of Justice Statistics corroborate



Charlie P.

was sentenced to life without parole and had his sentence commuted after 22 years in prison. When he was paroled, he enrolled in school, graduated with his bachelor's degree, and was accepted into a master's program at California State San Bernardino. Cypress, California.

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these findings,⁴⁴ along with a recent study conducted by Montclair State University that found a recidivism rate of just 1.14 percent among juveniles sentenced to life without parole in Philadelphia.⁴⁵

These low recidivism rates invalidate claims that LWOP is needed to ensure that people who have committed violent crimes must be locked away until death to prevent future crimes. In fact, the preliminary findings presented in this report suggest that individuals formerly sentenced to LWOP have among—if not the—lowest recidivism rates of anyone released from prison.⁴⁶

While the reasons for low levels of recidivism among individuals formerly sentenced to life without parole are varied and nuanced, many of those interviewed described personal change and renewed life philosophies as contributing factors. For instance, Kiilu W. noted:

“[G]rowing up, everything was about me ... I didn't care how my actions impacted anyone else. My role models were gangsters, so that's what I strove to be like. It took me being in prison for 17 years before I finally had an example of a positive male role model, and I started to emulate that role model and accept that life is all about the choices you make. I never used to take responsibility for my choices... Everything I did was somebody else's fault ... until I started going to all of the self-help classes they had for us in prison. And now that I'm out, it's become my mission to be that positive role model for others—for my family, for my nieces—and not only them. Now it's my turn to give back. It's not about me anymore. It's about how can I express my gratitude. How can I be of service to others?”⁴⁷



Kiilu W.

spent 32 years in prison with life without parole. After being released, he began working full-time as a utility technician and part-time as a sous chef for a catering company. He now works as a truck driver, and in his free time, he volunteers at food banks. Los Angeles, California.

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“I JUST WANT TO GIVE BACK”

“I think the vast majority of humans are redeemable. You know like me, every day I wake up and try to make amends for my crimes and try to do the best I can in memory of the victims in my case and their families and that’s how I try to live my life. I screwed up in the past, and if I could go back, I would change it, no hesitation. But you know, you can’t. But that doesn’t mean I can’t make a difference moving forward ... what matters now is what’s ahead of me, and I try to do the best that I can. I’ll never be able to fully make up for it, but I’ll do my best to try. [I’m] just doing my part to make a small difference.”

William H.⁴⁸

“The main thing is giving back, since I need to pay back what I owe. I used to be a pillager of the community, but now I can be a pillar. I want to show people and society that I committed these crimes—that I did a bad thing, but it doesn’t make me a bad person. After being released from prison, I reconnected with humanity, understand life is precious, and realized people are the world’s greatest assets. I learned how to be an asset not a liability in the world.”

Anthony W.⁴⁹

“I believe that wherever I am should be better because I’ve been there, and whoever I meet should be better because they’ve known me. I’m doing the most I can with the life I’ve been given, especially after taking a life...I’m a different person than I was for sure, but I want it to be maximized for the greatest good. I believe that my second chance is not for my benefit alone; I believe it’s been given to me for a bigger purpose, and I want to do the best I can with that.”

Wes B.⁵⁰



Wes B.

received a life without parole sentence for a crime he committed when he was 20 years old. During his 23 years in prison, he became an artist who helped others inside sell their artwork to support victims and charities. Since being released, he has continued this work. In this photo, he displays a pair of shoes he hand-painted with a portrait of the late rapper and activist, Nipsey Hussle. Los Angeles, California.

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LIFE OUTSIDE OF PRISON

While low recidivism rates undermine the need for LWOP sentences, they fail to capture the humanity of the people behind the statistics. Recidivism statistics focus solely on whether someone has committed a crime once released. But if they are not committing crimes, what are they doing? What about good? How are people contributing to their communities? This report aims to answer these questions and add a more holistic view to the growing body of research on the lives of individuals formerly sentenced to life without parole. This section examines aspects of the respondents' lives since release, including education, work, financial stability, personal relationships, and community involvement.

Education

Nearly all respondents (96 percent) stated that since being released they used education, training, and other skills gained while in prison. Upon leaving prison, many chose to further their education. Eight respondents reported earning their General Educational Development (GED) credential or graduating high school since release, and more than 30 respondents said they took college

courses. Three described earning an associate's degree and six said they completed a bachelor's degree while nineteen more described actively working towards a college or graduate degree.

Those interviewed repeatedly raised the idea of education as a means of healing and redemption. Tin N. noted:

“I'll get my degree next week. I'm applying for my MBA. It's been a journey. Growing up, everyone [would say] I was dumb, don't have a brain, saying I was going to drop out of school sooner or later. I dropped out and joined a gang. I believed that I didn't have a brain. [Now], to be able to graduate, and not only graduate, but graduate summa cum laude, shattered anything those people said to me ... and shattered my own belief [about who I could become] when I was growing up.”⁵¹



Tin N. had his life without parole sentence commuted by the governor, and he was later granted parole by the board. After returning home, he received his bachelor's degree from California State Los Angeles. He works as a dog trainer for service dogs. Los Angeles, California.

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Another commented:

“Education has been a tool in my personal development. After my release, I was able to continue my education. I even got a minor in philosophy, and it has continued to be an anchor and the positive reality that I choose to live and exist in. My education has continued to be a source of joy and inspiration and motivation.”

Daniel W. ⁵²

Allen B. spent 28 years in prison with life without parole. The governor commuted his sentence, and Allen was paroled. Since his release, he graduated from California State University in Los Angeles with a bachelor's degree and is now pursuing a master's degree. Los Angeles, California.

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Thaisan N. with his niece at his graduation from Cal State LA. Los Angeles, California.

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Thaisan N.

Thaisan was born as his parents fled Cambodia through a difficult jungle route, his mother giving birth after having lost her first born to starvation. They were escaping the Cambodian genocide, and Thaisan knows now that his parents experienced untold suffering. The family came to the US, and as he grew up, they didn't tell him much about the past. "It was ... traumatizing for them to speak on it," he said. That trauma deeply impacted his family life; his mother was physically and emotionally abusive to Thaisan. "[T]hat's how the war had affected her," he said. "In a sense, violence had become normalized to her."

Thaisan first found refuge in school. School was "a place where I knew I would be ... safe from her abuse." That was until the family moved to California, and he experienced racism and constant bullying from classmates. When he was only eight years old, he began to spend time with other young Cambodians who were being bullied, and a few years later, they joined a gang for protection. "They protected me in a way that my parents and my teachers could not." Eventually, his choices to embrace violence led to a drive-by shooting of a rival gang member. He and his younger brother were convicted of murder and sentenced to life without the possibility of parole.

In prison, being a gang member was an "identity I clung onto," he said. "I had no hope of ever going home, so why would I want to change?" His brother, however, began to take a different route and one day came to Thaisan's cell and handed him a college application. Thaisan looked at him incredulously. "Man, why the fuck would I sign up for college? What am I going to do with a degree in prison?" But to appease his brother, he completed the application, and a cascade of change began. "I started going to classes, and I was introduced to this whole other world," he reflected. "I was able to step outside of the culture of violence and gangs in prison that I existed in for such a long time and ... into

this arena of academia where I was introduced to history and different cultures."

Pursuing higher education did something else for Thaisan: "It allowed me to be ... more intentional in my reflection, challenging myself to ask ... why did I think like that? You know, like what made me behave this way?" It also gave him the strength to turn to therapy, deal with depression, and unpack his family's history of trauma. He earned his A.A. degree and became a part of the first B.A. program in a California prison.

In 2018, after serving over 20 years in prison, Thaisan was granted a rare gubernatorial commutation that made him eligible for parole. After being found suitable at a parole hearing, he was paroled in March 2021. He continued the education journey that transformed his life and has since graduated *summa cum laude* with a bachelor's degree from California State Los Angeles.

Work

While individual work experiences and levels of financial stability varied from person to person, there were common threads. For instance, 90 percent reported working, with the vast majority working full-time.⁵³

Full-time employment, however, is not the full story. Of those who are working, 56 percent worked more than 40 hours per week, and 40 percent held two or more jobs at once.⁵⁴ Respondents described this tendency to work multiple jobs or long hours as stemming from a desire to make up for lost time or out of financial necessity. For instance, Jarred V., who was 16 years old at the time of his crime and spent over 24 years in prison, described working upwards of 60 to 70 hours per week once released: “I’m starting off late [in life], so I want to do all that I can.”⁵⁵

Another commented that his circumstances required developing a strong work ethic. Recounting his effort to become financially stable after being paroled, Thomas W. said: “I have everything that I have because one job I worked seven days a week, 14-hour days, just to have enough to buy a car and an apartment. I’m really proud of the way that I worked, and I never gave up.”⁵⁶

Respondents also engaged in diverse fields of work—from construction and caretaking to founding their own businesses and working as artists. Approximately 20 percent worked in blue-collar or industrial jobs involving manual labor and another 12 percent worked in a service industry, including food, retail, and delivery. The most common field, however, was non-profit work. Forty-three percent reported working in the non-profit sector, most with organizations devoted to criminal legal system reform, youth, homelessness, and animal welfare.

Those working for non-profit organizations reported high levels of satisfaction from jobs they described as “giving back” to the community in some way. Howard J., for instance, is an ambassador for 2nd Call, an organization that works to reduce violence in the community by providing employment opportunities and resources to people who are formerly incarcerated and those experiencing homelessness. When describing his work, Howard noted: “I am so excited about the job I have and being able to give back ... we focus on the community, helping the places where many of us were before being incarcerated.”⁵⁷ Thomas Y., who works for an animal shelter, said:

“I love to go to work every day. At times we have 17, even 20 dogs. When I go into the shelter, I see myself in these dogs. They’re locked away, isolated, alone, sad, and depressed, just like I was in prison... Sometimes I just go in and sit with and love on them. The hardest part of the day is when I leave.”⁵⁸

Others explained that their work in the community gave them a sense of purpose. Christian B. works as a project coordinator for an organization called Healing Dialogue and Action which creates opportunities to heal for family members impacted by homicide, people who have been incarcerated, and communities affected by violent crime. He acknowledged “[the work that I do] is something that I consider as an amends [for the harm I caused] ... it is very intimate and personal to my life, and I think it does great things for others.”⁵⁹

Laverne T. echoed a similar sentiment. During her 26 years in prison, she completed trainings on occupational safety that she now uses to train others in her current role as an operations supervisor for a non-profit fighting homelessness. Laverne noted that many of the people they serve have been severely affected by an overdose crisis in San Francisco. “We do wellness checks all day long. Often [we find people who] are blue, stiff, foaming, or non-responsive.” Their team then responds, acting under pressure and in difficult circumstances. “We’ve been CPR trained and Narcan trained, and we try to get them back to consciousness ... we’ve saved over 300 lives ... it’s pretty scary, but I’m really proud of it.”⁶⁰



Tobias T.

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When asked what object would most clearly represent who he is today, Tobias T. held up two garden tools: a trowel and a pair of plant clippers. “When I was arrested 33 years ago, me and my friends were using tools of destruction, destroying our communities. I mean, not just destroying human life, but destroying space.... [T]hese tools represent my journey.” Garden tools might seem like a curious choice for a man who was convicted of a robbery that resulted in two murders at age 20. But after being sentenced to life without parole, Tobias chose a path in prison of self-improvement and helping others. After 28 years, he was paroled due to a governor’s recognition of his change and contributions, and he returned to the community intent on being a builder instead of a destroyer.

Tobias cofounded the nonprofit, Angel City Urban Farms because he believes that healing happens in community, and that growing food, preparing it, and giving it to people in need is a way of creating healing. “I’m an urban farmer,” he said, as he pointed out specks of dirt stuck along the edge of his trowel. “[This] dirt on here, some [from] Compton, Watts, Los Angeles, Beverly Hills, Pacific Palisades ... we utilize the urban farming as the means of ‘let us grow together.’” The organization works with community partners and offers opportunities to youth. “We give them safe spaces to be kids,” he says. “For some young people, I see them every day, I become their surrogate father.”

Gardening provides real sustenance, but for Tobias it is also a metaphor. “[T]he garden is actually the human heart, [s]o ... I’m cultivating, weeding and pruning, and I’m planting,” he explains. “We’re really ... cultivating community [and] not only cultivating community, we cultivate healing.”

And just like his garden, he has come a long way. “As a child, they said I didn’t have any human good in me, they said I was incorrigible. I proved them wrong.” “[Now,] every day, I make it count. Every day, I love on someone,” he says. “My capacity is not limited, I’m growing and becoming a better person, human, friend, citizen, every day. I’m proud I’m making this world a better place.”

Financially Helping Others

Of the 110 respondents, 102 said they financially support themselves. In addition, a strong majority—84 percent—reported financially assisting other people since being released from prison. They described providing this support to a range of people, from family and friends to community members, such as veterans and unhoused people.

Supporting Unhoused Populations

The act of financially helping unhoused people emerged as a common theme among respondents. After being released in 2018, DeAngelo M. now works as a pastor at a church and runs a non-profit in Los Angeles, but in his free time, he noted:

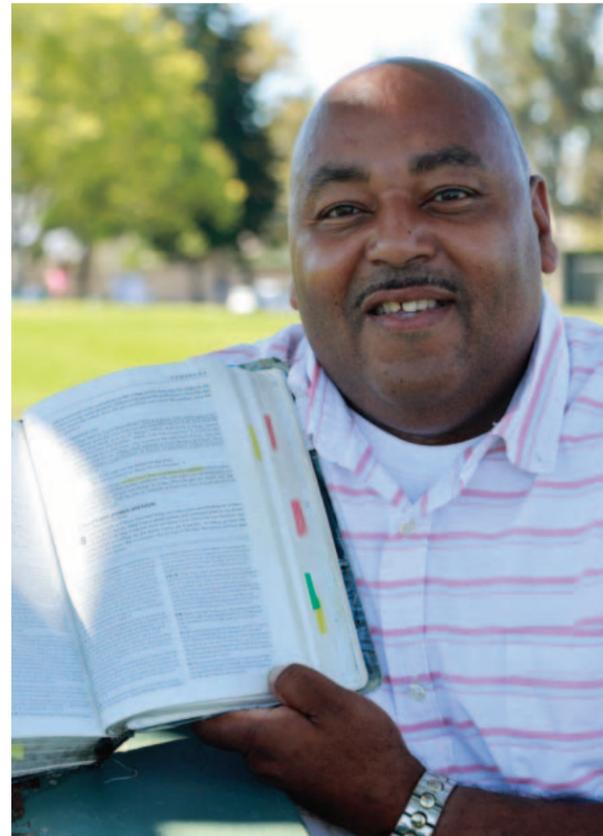
“Me and my wife, we feed the homeless downtown. We’ll go and buy hundreds and hundreds of socks, hundreds and hundreds of deodorants, combs, toothpaste, blankets, gloves, beanies, and food, and we’ll put together these kits, and we’ll get together and go down and just give them out.”⁶¹

Similarly, Thomas W. mentioned: “Me and my fiancée feed the homeless. Using our own funds, we made 300 meals for Easter, and we handed them out to the homeless in LA. We do that every couple of months.”⁶²

They described an affinity, noting that in some ways, the experience of an LWOP sentence was similar to that of people experiencing houselessness in feeling cast aside, despised, or forgotten by society. Juan C., who spent over 41 years in prison and is now almost 70 years old, contemplated:

“So many [unhoused people] feel hopeless. People feel like they don’t really exist, don’t really matter. I try to help them up. I relate to them as human beings, not as homeless.”⁶³

James H. added: “I now have a soft spot in my heart for people experiencing homelessness and needing to



DeAngelo M.

was sentenced to life without parole. He received a commutation and was paroled after 20 years in prison. He holds his Bible to represent the significance of his faith since being released. DeAngelo serves as a pastor at a church and helps run a non-profit that teaches narrative therapy. Cypress, California.

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panhandle. I have compassion for them because that’s what I feel happened to me.”⁶⁴

Similarly, Howard J. remarked: “I give money to people who are homeless [because] someone looked out for me while I was in prison, and I see this as my time to give back and help others.”⁶⁵

Supporting People Who Are Presently and Formerly Incarcerated

Of those financially assisting others, 37 percent said they help people who are currently incarcerated or have been recently released. “I know what it’s like to [be in prison



Kelly S.

was granted a governor’s commutation of her life without parole sentence and subsequently won parole at a board hearing. Now home, she volunteers with the organization, Women Against Rape, and answers calls that come in on the group’s hotline. Cypress, California.

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and] feel like you need something but don’t have a way to get it,” Oliver T. says. “[In prison], people make 25 cents an hour at the most, so having a little money goes a long way.”⁶⁶

Sara K., one of the first individuals in California to have an LWOP sentence commuted to a parole-eligible sentence, was released in 2013. She recently completed an inventory of her financial contributions over the past ten years and found that since being home, she has contributed over \$20,000—mostly to individuals who are still incarcerated. “And I’m going to keep doing it,” she said. “I might be within the poverty line, but if I’m

drinking coffee and eating a noodle, you’ll be drinking coffee and eating a noodle too.”⁶⁷

They support people getting out of prison in other ways as well, often remembering the difficulties of reentering society. Michele S., who had only been released two months before her interview, noted:

“[A]fter 30 years of being locked up, I have no idea how to navigate the DMV, or how to ride the bus, or how to get on the phone. There’s so many nuances to everyday living that people take for granted ... to come out to the real world is a huge shift.”⁶⁸

Respondents reported that they hoped to ease the reintegration process for others by providing support such as transportation upon release, purchasing essential items like food and clothing, and helping with potentially overwhelming tasks such as navigating the Department of Motor Vehicles to obtain a state ID or

“I JUST WANT TO GIVE BACK”

driver’s license, or working with the federal government to obtain a social security card. Taewon W., who spent over 26 years in prison, said he now contributes ongoing financial assistance “to fellow LWOPers who [have been] released.” He described helping their transition:

“I made sure that anyone else who was being released knew how to receive a social security card, food stamps, driver’s license, and anything they needed to function out here. I felt obligated to help those who would go through a similar process that I went through.”⁶⁹

Personal Relationships

Since being released from prison, the vast majority of respondents said they had established new relationships, nurtured or restored relationships with family members, and built new ties within the local community.

Establishing New Relationships

Nearly half had married or entered a committed relationship post-prison, and five had a new child. Others connect with children, often grown. “I talk on the phone every single day to my daughter,” said Kenneth H., additionally noting that “after I was released, I met a woman, and we have been partners for more than three years. I hope it lasts the rest of my life. It’s been a very good relationship.”⁷⁰

People also have embraced new parental roles. Describing his wife’s eight-year-old daughter from a previous marriage, Matthew V. told us: “She comes in and calls me dad, and gives me hugs every morning. I teach her how to fight better in jujitsu so that boys don’t mess with her. She’s a tough one!”⁷¹



Suzy M. was sentenced to life without parole for a crime she did not commit. Exonerated after 17 years in prison, she returned home and became active in prison ministries, going into jails and prisons to speak with women who are incarcerated. Los Angeles, California.

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Jamil W. had been in prison 24 years with a life without parole sentence when he received a commutation from the governor. Here he holds a miniature house to represent one of his proudest accomplishments since being released: his work serving people experiencing houselessness. He is now the deputy director of training at the nonprofit where he is employed. Woodside, California.

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Howard J. had been in prison for 34 years with a life without parole sentence when the governor granted him a commutation. He now works with people experiencing homelessness and people returning home from prison, providing resources and helping them find employment. Los Angeles, California.

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Nurturing and Repairing Relationships

Committing a crime and being sentenced to life without parole can harm relationships. Forty-five percent of respondents said they had worked to restore an estranged family relationship. For some, there has been healing and reconciliation. Roy C. said,

“I’ve ... been working on the broken relationships that I caused in my family. I’ve been reaching out to them, and they’ve been responding really well.”⁷²

Similarly, Thaisan N. reflected that:

“Because of the horrific crimes I’ve committed, my family was shattered ... I didn’t realize that my sisters became very hostile toward one another. So, when I came home, we had a family get together ... and it was encouraging for me to have my older sister say that me coming home is like a bridge to her getting her little sister back.”⁷³

For others, the estrangement has lingered. Howard J. noted: “Almost all my family relationships were estranged, and I am working on rebuilding the bridges I tore up.” He added: “It is an ongoing process ... it’s breaking my heart, [but] I am leaving the door open, and ... I am constantly trying to learn more about how to invest in relationships.”⁷⁴



Ny N. had her life without parole sentence reduced by a court, and she was ultimately pardoned by the governor. She is now the co-director of the Asian Prisoner Support Committee. Los Angeles, California.

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Judith B. said:

“Family reunification is hard when you’ve been down for a long time ... My son was a young teenager at the time I went to prison. Now, 28 years later, he has to ... deal with a mother who is aging [and] has been suddenly released from prison.”

She noted how difficult it is for children and said that “people should have compassion for [family members] with these unexpected releases.”⁷⁵

Four out of five respondents said they had cared for or assisted someone sick or an older person since being released. Fifty percent of that group cared for a parent or grandparent. Tommy D.’s father, for instance, acquired a disability during an accident at work, and Tommy has since stepped in to take care of him.⁷⁶

Others help people in their community. These include Paul B., who has looked out for his neighbor and assisted with daily tasks. “I care for my [older] neighbors who live alone,” said Paul. “I’ve had to go over there and pick [one of them] up off the floor. I [also] take the trash out and fix the trees.”⁷⁷

The last question on the survey asked what gives people the most joy in their lives. Nearly every respondent mentioned family.⁷⁸ Samuel E. told us that was an easy question to answer: “Being able to reunite with family and friends and actually doing some good.”⁷⁹ Josh C. said, “What gives me the most joy is just being at home with family. We’re not doing nothing but being home and being family.”⁸⁰ Dianna P. joked, “My family! Oh, absolutely my family! My cat comes in close second. His name is Mango, and he’s so darling. He’s the best cuddler.”⁸¹

“I JUST WANT TO GIVE BACK”

Building New Ties in the Local Community

Many respondents said they built new ties in their communities through volunteering and joining local organizations. Leif T. noted:

“I’ve done community and neighborhood cleanups—pull weeds, paint over graffiti, things of that nature. I’ve also volunteered at a city councilman’s office. They were putting together a jazz festival and needed a lot of help orchestrating it and setting everything up. Whatever is needed in the community, I usually step up and help out in whatever way [I can].”⁸²

The following section explores other ways this group has contributed to and engaged with their local communities.

Contributing to Community

People who have served long prison sentences can face social and cultural barriers to contributing their time and resources to the communities they return to. Nevertheless, the vast majority of respondents said they had been actively involved in their communities since being released. Ninety-four percent reported volunteering with charities, community organizations, or nonprofit organizations since release, and 98 percent said they informally helped community members who needed help. Comparatively, between September 2020 and 2021, only an estimated 18.3 percent of Californians formally volunteered with organizations and only 46.1 percent informally helped their neighbors.⁸³ The most common forms of volunteerism among the survey respondents were mentoring, sports, or other activities with youth; assisting in food banks or otherwise helping people in poverty or experiencing houselessness; working with religious or community organizations; and volunteering in animal shelters.

Mentoring Youth

Many said they have sought out ways to be a positive influence on youth. Seven out of ten said that since leaving prison they had stepped into a healthy adult role

in the life of a young person, whether a relative, friend’s child, or through a program that works with youth. They described building relationships with youth in hopes of passing on life lessons. Deryl A., who spent over 40 years in prison, now mentors a few young people in his community. He described one of them, saying, “[H]e’s 13 years old. His father is nowhere around. I spend a lot of time with him because if I don’t, the gangs out here will snatch him up. If you don’t have love at home, you seek it elsewhere.”⁸⁴ Another respondent, Michael Y., told us:

“I have a troubled nephew ... and his probation officer calls me, and I’m on good terms with her. He’s run away so many times, and I’ve gone after him and have gone into the gang area and chased him down and brought him home. I share so much with him, and I’ve broken a lot of ground. He now doesn’t want to hang out with those guys. He’s 15 years old and is doing better in school and getting involved in baseball.”⁸⁵

Leif T. and Susan B.

were both formerly sentenced to life without parole. Here they stand in front of the California capitol after attending a gathering in support of crime victims. Leif, who committed his crime as a juvenile, was granted a parole hearing due to changes in state law, while Susan’s sentence was commuted by the governor, allowing her to earn parole. Since their release, they have dedicated their time to volunteering with nonprofits and community organizing. Sacramento, California.

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Hung N. was released on parole after his life without parole sentence was commuted by the governor. He is currently working on a college degree and volunteers with the Asian Law Caucus. Los Angeles, California.

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The interviews of these individuals illuminated a common thread stemming from their many years of incarceration: self-reflection and the role of youthfulness in their decision-making when most committed the crimes for which they were sentenced to LWOP. The reason so many in this group said they had invested in mentoring youth is that they recognized the importance of childhood and adolescent environments and the susceptibility of youth to the influences around them. For instance, Christina M. took up a mentorship role in the lives of several struggling youth in her community. She noted:

“If I would’ve been given the opportunity to learn or had a mentor or someone willing to say, ‘hey this isn’t the right idea,’ I could’ve possibly went down a different path. Now that I have this experience and knowledge, [children I mentor] don’t have to go through the experience to learn.”⁸⁶

Another expressed a similar sentiment, stating, “One of my goals is to work with the troubled youth of today and share my story with them so that they can learn without having to experience it first-hand.”⁸⁷



Jawad J.

Jawad somehow exudes both gentleness and intensity. He listens intently. He responds gently. He also looks impossibly younger than someone who spent nearly 25 years in prison.

He was only 16 when arrested under California’s felony murder rule for a murder committed by someone else.⁸⁷ Sentenced to life in prison without parole, years later he got a chance for release when the law changed limiting when children can be sentenced to LWOP. He calls that second chance a blessing beyond words, and it is what inspires him. In prison, he says, “I didn’t have the opportunity to speak for myself.” Now he wants to use his voice for others. “I will always speak for the voiceless. I will always speak up for justice.”

One way he does that is by mentoring youth in his community. Every Thursday, Jawad goes back to the same high school he was kicked out of years ago in South Central Los Angeles and meets with students there. He answers questions, acts as a big brother, and helps as someone who understands what they are going through. “I think it is important to be an example of those who want to do better.” He sees himself at that age in them,

Jawad J. holds his daughter, Assiyah, next to his significant other, Aaliah H. Cypress, California.

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and thinking about it sometimes makes him tear up. “Just to be able to give back ... bring some kind of guidance and understanding to their situations ... it makes me want to do more and be a part of that change.”

Jawad also has a passion for helping unhoused people. He co-founded the volunteer-run non-profit, City Hall Sessions Los Angeles, which serves unhoused populations. “We saw there was a need and we said, ‘Let’s do something about this. What can we do? Whatever resources we have, let’s just start buying food, water, and hygiene [products], and let’s start passing it out.’” Each week they distribute premade meals to older people in his community, and on Fridays, he and the other volunteers travel to downtown Los Angeles and feed hundreds of people in the heart of Skid Row.

When he now holds his baby girl, Assiyah, who was born in 2021, he hopes that the work he does will impact her positively in some way. “I hope when she grows up, she knows her father made mistakes in life, but he learned from his mistakes.”



Christian B.

spent 25 years in prison after being sentenced to life without parole. The governor of California commuted the sentence, and Christian earned release from the parole board. Once released, he chose to work with others in prison as well as survivors of crime at the non-profit, Healing Dialogue and Action. Los Angeles, California.

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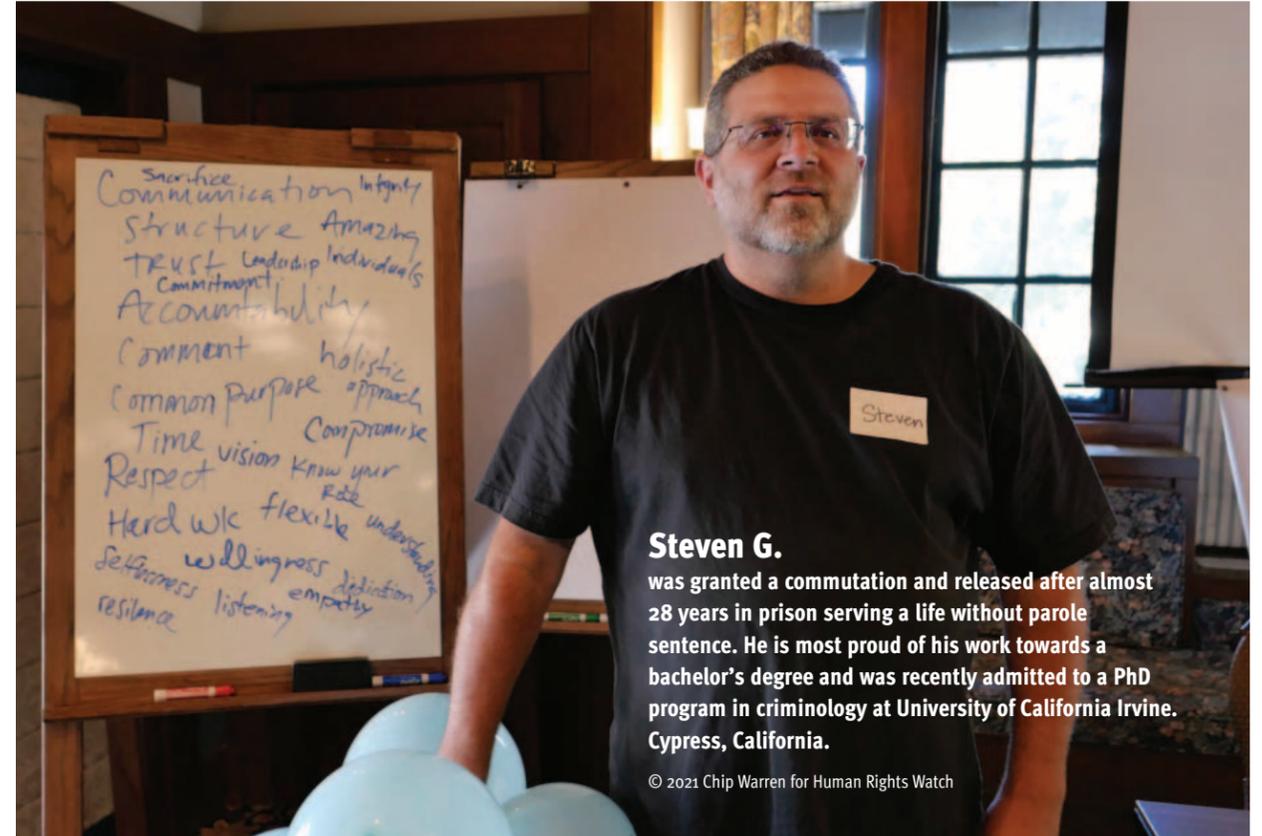
Participation in Religious Organizations

Sixty-two percent of respondents said they participated in religious organizations since being released. They reflect a diverse range of faiths and backgrounds. During Eric C.’s 28 years in prison, he became a practicing Buddhist and is now a part of the organization that first came to his prison: “They were coming into the institution providing non-denominational Buddhist teachings ... at the time, the program creator, who was almost like a spiritual mom to me, discussed how I could be involved if I ever got out.” Now he attends weekly meetings and gathers with others to meditate and “go over some of the rituals and precepts that follow along with Buddhist teachings.”⁸⁹

Many credited their faith as having been instrumental during their time in prison and acknowledged the central role it continues to play in their lives. “The number one thing [in my life] is my foundation of connection with the creator, God,” says Paul C., who spent over 37 years in prison. Paul described connecting with his Native American heritage and spirituality through volunteering at Native American sweat lodges. He would often help set up the sweat lodge ceremonies and assist the spiritual leader. “It brings me [such happiness] to see someone lit up with that spirit of the creator, just glowing.”⁹⁰

Paul and others have also engaged in public speaking in religious settings on topics such as their personal testimonies and restorative justice. Jim W., who identifies as Jewish and is a Vietnam veteran who spent over 40 years in prison, has gone into multiple synagogues to speak with young people. “[Public speaking] is something that I’m not that comfortable with, but at the same time it needs to be done to make sure that these kids stay on the right path.”⁹¹ Likewise, Christian B. has spoken with many religious groups and churches about his personal story, including his transformation and reconciliation journey with one of the survivors of his crime.⁹²

Others described feeling a strong sense of family and community in their religious organizations upon release. Judith B. noted: “In this town, the church is so quick to embrace newcomers. So, I go to Bible study and other events. That has served as the crux of my life here.”⁹³ Similarly, Danilo C., who lives in Nicaragua, said, “I am active in my church. I am there faithfully ... it is like another home for me.”⁹⁴



Steven G.

was granted a commutation and released after almost 28 years in prison serving a life without parole sentence. He is most proud of his work towards a bachelor’s degree and was recently admitted to a PhD program in criminology at University of California Irvine, Cypress, California.

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Community Organizing and Advocacy

An additional 37 percent of respondents reported being involved in organizations having to do with political or community organizing and advocacy. Steven G., who spent almost 28 years in prison and was recently admitted to a Ph.D. program at the University of California Irvine, volunteers with prison reform and advocacy groups:

“We do work to try to humanize people and adjust language from things like ‘convict’ to ‘formerly incarcerated.’ I also share my experience and my story to show that we have good qualities and are redeemable.”⁹⁵

Many individuals also described being civically engaged and participating in many levels of politics to catalyze change. Eric C., who helped a candidate make calls for their reelection campaign, noted:

“There were several other propositions on the ballot that we were also trying to get voters to vote ‘Yes’ for ... [One] was about the reinstatement for voting rights of people who were previously incarcerated. I said, ‘If I want it, I need to be a part of it.’”⁹⁶

In a bit of a surprise, Kenneth H. reflected on the improbable nature of his political involvement. “Just today I spoke with a California state senator about the need for increased funding for healing programs.” He recalled the senator responding, “I just want to thank you for the work that you’re doing.” He described the experience as surreal and gratifying: “And when I step back from moments like that—you know, at one point I was sentenced to die in prison, and now I’m being thanked by a state senator about how my work is helpful for currently incarcerated people and their families and for society.”⁹⁷



Marcus M.

was sentenced to double life without parole for crimes he committed when he was 21 years old. After 32 years in prison, his sentence was commuted by a governor, and he went through the parole process and was released. He now works as the manager of an animal shelter, saving abandoned and abused dogs who would have otherwise been euthanized. Mission Hills, California.

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Animal Rescue and Training

A love for animals was a recurring theme for many interviewees. Animals, including pets, were often mentioned as a source of joy, and 22 percent of respondents reported volunteering for organizations dedicated to animal rescue or training. Thomas W. was released in 2020 after spending 23 years in prison. Outside of his part-time job, he was able to spend his free time volunteering around 40 hours per week at an organization called Paws for Life K9 Rescue.

“We rescue dogs and try to train them to become emotional support dogs or service dogs ... [and then] we donate [them] to veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), firefighters, doctors, nurses, and even some of the students who survived school shootings ... to help them recover from their trauma.”⁹⁸

Thaisan N., who also volunteered with the same organization, commented on the humanizing nature of caring for animals: “When people see you loving a dog and training a dog, people look at you like holy crap, you *are* a human being!”⁹⁹



Before the Covid-19 pandemic, Susan B. also volunteered as a dog trainer for service dogs. Her description of training animals, as one activity among her many other volunteering commitments, is a fitting encapsulation of the many diverse ways people formerly sentenced to LWOP are actively contributing to their communities:

“I currently volunteer with the California Coalition for Women’s Prisoners.... I [also] volunteer monthly at a church to help distribute food [and] speak on domestic violence, incarceration, and life choices at high schools and colleges. I also volunteer at Native American sweat lodges [and] have been a dog trainer pre-Covid by training service dogs.... It has been an amazing opportunity. I am not in the position to donate financially but try and give to those when I can.”¹⁰⁰

Susan B.

spent 32 years in prison before her sentence of life without parole was commuted by the governor. When released, she began volunteering with several groups, including one that provides blankets for wheelchair-bound veterans. Here she holds one of her soon-to-be-donated hand-crocheted quilts. Cypress, California.

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Others may not have been able to take part in as many activities as Susan, but a unifying theme among almost every individual we interviewed is a desire to do so, in part to make amends for their crime or past life, and also because they truly believe they have things to offer their community. “I am getting on my feet, working two jobs and school, so I feel like I haven’t had time to get involved in the community like I’d want to,” said Ceona H. after being back for less than a year. “But as soon as I get more grounded, I will be more involved.”¹⁰¹



Gabby S. in Ensenada, Mexico.

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Gabby S.

Gabby was just two years old when she was brought to the United States. She went on to become a lawful permanent resident and grew up enjoying her childhood. She was always good in school, her parents took her to Disneyland every summer, and she loved playing outside with her two sisters. “We had a huge backyard, and we’d make up games and be back there for hours, just the three of us.”

As an adult, she was in a relationship with an abusive man and lived in fear, experiencing years of domestic violence. Gabby was the driver in several robberies committed by her boyfriend, and in one, he killed the victim.¹⁰² Although she did not intend to kill anyone, she was convicted under laws that made her responsible for her boyfriend’s actions and was sentenced to life without the possibility of parole. She was 25 years old at the time.

While in prison, Gabby earned two degrees, took over 1,000 hours of rehabilitative classes, and worked as an office clerk for 12 years.¹⁰³ In 2018, California Governor Jerry Brown commuted her sentence to 20 years to life. She was paroled on March 29, 2021, after serving more than 22 years in prison. That day, US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) took Gabby into custody and transported her to a detention facility in Colorado where she was held for three months before being deported to Mexico.

In Mexico, Gabby had no place to live. ICE dropped her off with no support in Nogales—a border town 15 hours by car from the place where she could stay with a friend’s brother. She said she had been offered two jobs but had been unable to start either one because she could not procure Mexican identification documents. She was also prevented from seeing her mother, who is older and unable to leave southern California.

“Last time I lived in Mexico, I was two years old,” she said. “I knew there was a possibility I could be deported, but people told me it was unlikely. Even after my hearing, people said it might not happen ... I was kind of in denial, telling myself, they’re not going to come ... I’m going to get to go home, be with my family. But [ICE] came and picked me up a day before I was supposed to parole ... They took me to Colorado, and I was in a detention facility for three months, trying to challenge the deportation, but then I just gave up. I gave up challenging my deportation. I told my attorney to just forget it, I just wanted out.”

Hardships

Throughout the course of the interviews, some respondents described hardships they have encountered since release from prison.¹⁰⁴ Covid-19 restrictions and limitations made a number of respondents feel like they were in prison again, especially when it came to being separated from their families. By the same token, they cited the resilience gained from their time in prison as making it easier for them to adjust.¹⁰⁵ Some who were released during the pandemic even found that the slowness of life during Covid-19 shutdowns made it easier to acclimate and adjust to life outside. About one in four respondents said that Covid-19 restrictions have impacted their ability to be involved in the community.

Others struggled with financial hardships. James H. spent 31 years in prison and now works as a cashier at Home Depot. He mentioned, “My financial state is dismal. I’m just doing the best I can ... I’ve had to help my son, who is in Texas.” He continued: “He is raising three children of his own, so I do what I can. He was only two months old when I got arrested, so I feel like I owe him everything. But I have nothing really to give.” Despite his financial struggles, he has found joy and gratitude in connecting with people:

“In the past, I saw people as just my next victim, and now I see them as human beings ... that’s one of my greatest gifts, joys, and blessings today is just to be able to talk to people. I love greeting them, I love asking them questions when they come in and make purchases. The joy I get out of that! Sometimes it lights them up just as bright as it lights me up, I’m just thankful for that.”¹⁰⁶

The eight people living outside of the US were deported upon completion of their sentence and described the hardship and emotional harm associated with their deportation. While some felt abandoned or lost in a country they had not lived in since childhood, others commented on the struggles associated with political repression and poverty. Gabby S. reflected: “I’m in a country that is new to me—I last lived in Mexico when I was two years old, and now I am 48.”¹⁰⁷

Despite some of the hardships, many of those who were deported said they had found ways of giving back to their communities as they adjusted to their new country. Roman R. acknowledged that “as soon as I got out of prison [and was deported], I tried to keep busy, so I didn’t get down on myself.” He sought out work and volunteer activities that were meaningful and said that he now works as a caretaker, construction worker, and artist. He cares for his mother who has Alzheimer’s and diabetes, babysits children in the community, and leads Bible studies. “I am trying to make amends,” Roman said. “But also just help out and make my community a better, safer place.”¹⁰⁸

For most, their time in prison appears to have forged an unbreakable resilience. “Many of us are unprepared [for] life outside,” said Sara K. “You learn as you go based on the tools and skillset [you build]. We have superhero abilities because we know how to work under concentrated, oppressive environments.”¹⁰⁹

...

In the face of hardships, the majority of respondents expressed a profound sense of remorse and a strong desire to make amends for the harm they have caused as their primary driving force. “I have to give back to my community,” said Brandi T. “I can’t unring a bell. I just want to be able to give back to a community that I took so much from.”¹¹⁰ Leif conveyed a similar sentiment. “You almost feel a sense of obligation, like, how could you not?” he questioned. “It’s almost as if we owe it to our victims.”¹¹¹



Joseph B. had his life without parole sentence commuted by the governor and was resentenced at the motion of his county district attorney. He now works at the Felton Institute, where he assists individuals on probation or pretrial, by connecting them with resources that can enhance their chances of success in the community. Woodside, California.

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Troy S.

works for Urban Alchemy, a non-profit that serves communities at the intersection of poverty, addiction, and houselessness. He focuses on outreach by building interpersonal relationships with unhoused neighbors, conducting wellness checks, finding housing placements, and submitting mental health referrals.



Troy hands out water and hygiene kits to people who are unhoused and connects with a woman he recently helped secure housing. Los Angeles, California.

All photos © 2023 Patricia Williams



“My whole thing is not to be the next person that walked by them without acknowledging them,” Troy says. “And what I mean by that is they are judged, they are overlooked...and at times they feel hopeless and helpless. When I was sentenced as a juvenile, incarcerated at the age of 16 and thrown in prison, I also felt hopeless and powerless over my situation. I might not get a response, but I’m going to stay consistent...And I just meet them where they are and show kindness, love, compassion, and empathy. Because I realize when I look at them in those tents, that could have been me, or I might be one paycheck away from being in that situation.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

To California Legislators

- **Pass proactive and retroactive legislation that ends the use of life without parole sentences in California.**
- **Until the sentence of life without parole is eliminated, pass legislation that limits the circumstances under which the sentence can be used or otherwise provides second-look opportunities, such as by making people sentenced to life without parole who were 25 or younger at the time of their crime eligible for Youth Offender Parole hearings.**

To the California Governor

- **Call for and, when passed, sign state legislation that entirely eliminates the sentence of life without parole.**
- **Until the sentence of life without parole is eliminated, call for and sign legislation that limits the circumstances under which the sentence can be used, or otherwise provides second-look opportunities.**
- **Regarding commutations, until the sentence of life without parole is eliminated:**
 - **Affirmatively conduct a search for people eligible for commutations and commute more life without parole sentences to sentences that make people eligible for parole including, where appropriate, Youth Offender Parole.**
 - **Instruct the Board of Parole Hearings to promulgate regulations establishing an objective and meaningful review of all persons sentenced to life without parole for possible commutations of sentence and/or referral to the sentencing court for recall of sentence and resentencing under section 1172.1 of the Penal Code.**

To the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation and the Board of Parole Hearings

- **Promulgate regulations establishing an objective and meaningful review of all persons sentenced to life without parole for possible commutations of sentence and/or referral to the sentencing court for recall of sentence and resentencing under section 1172.1 of the Penal Code.**
- **Ensure that people sentenced to life without parole have access to education, vocational training, trauma-responsive health services, and other meaningful opportunities for rehabilitation and preparation for reentry.**

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NOTES

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⁸Human Rights Watch, *Nation Behind Bars: A Human Rights Solution* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2014), https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/related_material/2014_US_Nation_Behind_Bars_o.pdf.

⁹Dirk Van Zyl Smit and Catherine Appleton, *Life Imprisonment: A Global Human Rights Analysis* (Harvard University Press, 2019), p. 346.

¹⁰“Juvenile Life Without Parole (JLWOP),” Juvenile Law Center, <https://jlc.org/issues/juvenile-life-without-parole> (accessed July 1, 2022).

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¹⁹Hans Johnson, Eric McGhee, and Marisol Cuellar Mejia, “California’s Population,” Public Policy Institute of California, January 2023, <https://www.ppic.org/publication/californias-population/> (accessed May 1, 2023).

²⁰Division of Correctional Policy Research and Internal Oversight, “Section 2: Persons Serving Life Without the Possibility of Parole” (Office of Research: California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, September 8, 2020), unpublished data on file with Human Rights Watch.

²¹“LWOP Data – JLWOP and Commutations,” unpublished data on file with Human Rights Watch, November 2021.

²²In this report, the words “juvenile” and “child” are used to refer to someone under the age of 18.

²³In *Graham v. Florida* 560 U.S. 48 (2010), the US Supreme Court held that given juvenile offenders’ lack of maturity and underdeveloped sense of responsibility, sentencing them to life without parole for non-homicide offenses amounted to cruel and unusual punishment, thereby violating the Eighth Amendment to the US Constitution. Two years later, these principles of adolescent development were reaffirmed in *Miller v. Alabama*, 567 U.S. 460 (2012), when the court ruled that mandatorily sentencing a juvenile offender to life without parole also violated the Eighth Amendment. Shortly after the Miller decision, further rulings, including *People v. Caballero*, 55 Cal.4th 262 (2012), *People v. Gutierrez*, 58 Cal.4th 1354 (2014), and *In re Kirchner*, 2 Cal.5th 1040 (2017), along with California legislation, such as SB 9 (2012) and SB 394 (2017), continued integrating research on adolescent brain development, including characteristics of youthfulness and receptivity to rehabilitation.

²⁴Cal Penal Code § 1170(d)(1).

²⁵John R. Mills, Anna M. Dorn, and Amelia Courtney Hritz, “Juvenile Life Without Parole in Law and Practice: Chronicling the Rapid Change Underway,” *American University Law Review* vol. 65, no. 3, article 4 (2016): 557, [1https://digitalcommons.wcl.american.edu/aulr/vol65/iss3/4?utm_source=digitalcommons.wcl.american.edu%2Faulr%2Fvol65%2Fiss3%2F4&utm_medium=PDF&utm_campaign=PDFCoverPages](https://digitalcommons.wcl.american.edu/aulr/vol65/iss3/4?utm_source=digitalcommons.wcl.american.edu%2Faulr%2Fvol65%2Fiss3%2F4&utm_medium=PDF&utm_campaign=PDFCoverPages) (accessed May 1, 2023); Michael Harris, “California Law Gives Youth Sentenced to Life Without Parole Another Chance,” National Center for Youth Law, January 1, 2013, <https://youthlaw.org/news/california-law-gives-youth-sentenced-life-without-parole-another-chance> (accessed May 1, 2023); Elizabeth Calvin (Human Rights Watch), “Growing Up Behind Bars,” commentary, *Los Angeles Times*, January 13, 2014, <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-calvin-juvenile-prison-sentences-20140113-story.html>.

²⁶567 U.S. 460 (2012).

²⁷It is not uncommon for legislation and court rulings to build on one another. For instance, SB 394, a 2017 California statute, enacted Wyoming’s model legislation to ensure California law complied with the US Supreme Court ruling in *Montgomery v. Louisiana*, 577 U.S. (2016).

²⁸Cal Penal Code §§ 3051 and 4801. California’s Youth Offender Parole law provides people who were age 25 or younger at the time of their crime a parole consideration process that accounts for factors contributing to diminished culpability due to age and, in some cases, allows an earlier initial parole hearing. People who were under 18 at the time of their crime and sentenced to LWOP are eligible for the Youth Offender Parole process after serving no less than 25 years in prison. People who were ages 18 through 25 and sentenced to LWOP are not currently eligible for Youth Offender Parole, although legal challenges to this exclusion are pending.

²⁹California Constitution, art. V § 8, <https://casetext.com/statute/california-constitution/article-v-executive/section-8> (accessed April 14, 2023).

³⁰“LWOP Data – JLWOP and Commutations,” unpublished data on file with Human Rights Watch, November 2021.

³¹The average time spent in prison for the group was 26.4 years. Women are also overrepresented in the sample. Though women make up 20 percent of the group interviewed, they represent only 3.5 percent of the total population of people sentenced to LWOP in California.

³²While individuals can be sentenced to life without parole for various crimes in California, the majority of people with the sentence (96 percent) were convicted of murder in the first degree.

³³Hans Johnson et al., “Homeownership Trends in California,” Public Policy Institute of California, June 14, 2022, <https://www.ppic.org/blog/homeownership-trends-in-california/> (accessed May 1, 2023).

³⁴Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Rosemary D., May 18, 2021.

³⁵Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Susan B., May 23, 2021.

³⁶David P. Farrington, Rolf Loeber, and James C. Howell, “Young Adult Offenders: The Need for More Effective Legislative Options and Justice Processing,” *Criminology & Public Policy*, vol. 11 (2012): pp. 729–50, accessed May 1, 2023, doi:10.1111/j.1745-9133.2012.00842.x; David P. Farrington, “Age and Crime,” *Crime and Justice*, vol. 7 (1986): pp. 189–250, accessed May 1, 2023, doi:10.1086/449114.

³⁷This individual is Sara K., whose case was first brought to light by Human Rights Watch in 2011. See “Fighting Extreme Sentencing for Child Offenders,” Human Rights Watch news release, February 14, 2011, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/02/14/fighting-extreme-sentencing-child-offenders>.

³⁸Although most releases occurred in the last three years, the majority of commutations were issued before that time by former California Governor Jerry Brown. This is because commutations typically result in eligibility for a parole hearing, and initial parole hearings take time to be scheduled. Additionally, many people are denied parole and must wait three years or longer for a second hearing to be set. A recent report suggests that as of January 2023, as many as one third of individuals who had received a commutation by Governor Gavin Newsom remained in prison. See Mackenzie Mays, “Newsom Told 123 Prisoners They Could Get out Early. Why Are a Third Still behind Bars?” *Los Angeles Times*, February 8, 2023, <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2023-02-08/gavin-newsom-california-commutations> (accessed May 1, 2023).

³⁹Recent reports have documented the increasing numbers of older people in the US serving LWOP in a carceral system that is ill-equipped to handle their support needs. See Ashley Nellis, “Nothing But Time: Elderly Americans Serving Life Without Parole,” <https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/nothing-but-time-elderly-americans-serving-life-without-parole/>.

⁴⁰While Terrie Moffitt’s developmental theory of crime suggests that criminal behavior can be lifelong for some individuals, most research has shown that the majority of people age out of criminal behavior as they transition into adulthood. See Caitlin V. M. Cornelius, Christopher J. Lynch, and Ross Gore, “Aging Out of Crime: Exploring the Relationship Between Age and Crime with Agent-Based Modeling,” April 2017, accessed May 1, 2023, doi:10.22360/springsim.2017.ads.006.

⁴¹Division of Correctional Policy Research and Internal Oversight, “Type of Conviction within Three Years of Release from CDCR, Offenders Released Between 2011 and 2019 Who were LWOPs and Subsequently Resentenced” (Office of Research: California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, May 12 2023), unpublished data on file with Human Rights Watch.

⁴²Ashley Nellis, “A New Lease on Life,” The Sentencing Project, June 30, 2021, <https://www.sentencingproject.org/reports/a-new-lease-on-life/> (accessed May 1, 2023).

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⁴⁴ Leonardo Antenangeli and Matthew Durose, “Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 24 States in 2008: A 10-Year Follow-Up Period (2008–2018),” Recidivism of Prisoners Released, September 2021, <https://bjs.ojp.gov/library/publications/recidivism-prisoners-released-24-states-2008-10-year-follow-period-2008-2018> (accessed May 1, 2023), p. 10.

⁴⁵ Tarika Daftary-Kapur and Tina M. Zottoli, “Resentencing of Juvenile Lifers: The Philadelphia Experience,” Montclair State University, April 2020, <https://www.msudecisionmakinglab.com/philadelphia-juvenile-lifers> (accessed May 1, 2023).

⁴⁶ “Recidivism Report for Offenders Released from the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation in Fiscal Year 2015-16,” Division of Correctional Policy Research and Internal Oversight: California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, September 2021, <https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/research/wp-content/uploads/sites/174/2022/08/Recidivism-Report-for-Offenders-Released-in-Fiscal-Year-2015-16.pdf> (accessed May 1, 2023).

⁴⁷ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Kiilu W., May 14, 2021.

⁴⁸ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with William H., May 15, 2021.

⁴⁹ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Anthony W., August 31, 2021.

⁵⁰ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Wes B., August 25, 2021.

⁵¹ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Tin N., May 15, 2021.

⁵² Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Daniel W., June 15, 2021.

⁵³ This number does not include in the denominator the six individuals who are retired or the one individual who has a disability and cannot work. All retired individuals were between the ages of 66 and 77 years old. For the purposes of this report, full-time work is defined as 40 hours per week.

⁵⁴ Fourteen of these individuals reported working three or four jobs at the same time.

⁵⁵ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Jarred V., August 28, 2021.

⁵⁶ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Thomas W., May 19, 2021.

⁵⁷ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Howard J., July 9, 2021.

⁵⁸ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Thomas Y., September 2, 2021.

⁵⁹ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Christian B., May 18, 2021.

⁶⁰ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Laverne T., July 19, 2021.

⁶¹ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with DeAngelo M., May 13, 2021.

⁶² Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Thomas W., May 19, 2021.

⁶³ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Juan C., May 11, 2021.

⁶⁴ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with James H., August 24, 2021.

⁶⁵ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Howard J., July 9, 2021.

⁶⁶ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Oliver T., September 4, 2021.

⁶⁷ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Sara K., May 21, 2021.

⁶⁸ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Michele S., August 28, 2021.

⁶⁹ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Taewon W., June 19, 2021.

⁷⁰ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Kenneth H., May 24, 2021.

⁷¹ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Matthew V., June 18, 2021.

⁷² Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Roy C., June 25, 2021.

⁷³ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Thaisan N., May 15, 2021.

⁷⁴ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Howard J., July 9, 2021.

⁷⁵ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Judith B., June 17, 2021.

⁷⁶ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Tommy D., May 17, 2021.

⁷⁷ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Paul B., May 17, 2021.

⁷⁸ Other answers included freedom, faith, animals, small things, and being able to help people and give back to their communities.

⁷⁹ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Samuel E., July 20, 2021.

⁸⁰ The name of this individual has been changed to protect their privacy. Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Josh C., June 20, 2021.

⁸¹ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Dianna P., June 28, 2021.

⁸² Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Leif T., June 15, 2021.

⁸³ “Volunteering and Civic Life in America: California,” AmeriCorps, <https://americorps.gov/about/our-impact/volunteering-civic-life/ca> (accessed March 9, 2023).

⁸⁴ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Deryl A., July 26, 2021.

⁸⁵ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Michael Y., July 6, 2021.

⁸⁶ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Christina M., September 6, 2021.

⁸⁷ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Roy C., June 25, 2021.

⁸⁸ Under California’s felony murder rule, a defendant can be sentenced to LWOP if someone dies during the commission of a felony, regardless of whether the defendant intended to cause death or not.

⁸⁹ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Eric C., May 20, 2021.

⁹⁰ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Paul C., September 2, 2021.

⁹¹ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Jim W., May 18, 2021.

⁹² Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Christian B., May 18, 2021.

⁹³ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Judith B., June 17, 2021.

⁹⁴ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Danilo C., July 4, 2021.

⁹⁵ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Steven G., May 23, 2021.

⁹⁶ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Eric C., May 20, 2021.

⁹⁷ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Kenneth H., May 24, 2021.

⁹⁸ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Thomas W., May 19, 2021.

⁹⁹ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Thaisan N., May 15, 2021.

¹⁰⁰ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Susan B., May 23, 2021.

¹⁰¹ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Ceona H., September 4, 2021.

¹⁰² *People v. Solano*, No. B303993 (Cal. Ct. App. Jun. 10, 2021).

¹⁰³ Bianca Bruno, “ICE Contractor Tasked With Immigration Arrests Faces Class Action,” *Courthouse News Service*, February 22, 2021, <https://www.courthousenews.com/ice-contractor-tasked-with-immigration-arrests-faces-class-action/> (accessed May 1, 2023).

¹⁰⁴ This aligns with research on the challenges of re-entry, including minimal preparation and lack of resources while in prison, limited employment and housing opportunities, and other socioeconomic barriers. See Melissa Li, “From Prisons to Communities: Confronting Re-Entry Challenges and Social Inequality,” American Psychological Association, March 2018, <https://www.apa.org/pi/ses/resources/indicator/2018/03/prisons-to-communities> (accessed May 1, 2023).

¹⁰⁵ This resilience was likely forged in the face of abominable conditions within California prisons. All of the individuals interviewed for this report were incarcerated during a time when California’s prison system reached a breaking point. “Prisoners were sleeping in gyms, hallways and day-rooms ... there were dozens of riots and hundreds of attacks on guards every year. Suicide rates were 80 percent higher than in the rest of the nation’s prisons.” See Sacramento Bee and ProPublica, “Cruel and Unusual: A Guide to California’s Broken Prisons and the Fight to Fix Them,” *ProPublica*, May 28, 2019, <https://www.propublica.org/article/guide-to-california-prisons> (accessed May 1, 2023).

¹⁰⁶ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with James Harris, August 24, 2021.

¹⁰⁷ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Gabby S., August 1, 2021.

¹⁰⁸ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Roman R., August 25, 2021.

¹⁰⁹ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Sara K., May 21, 2021.

¹¹⁰ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Brandi T., June 22, 2021.

¹¹¹ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Leif T., June 15, 2021.



Thaisan N.

returned to prison to encourage and support friends left behind. Here he is hugging a friend who graduated from Cal State LA while in prison. Lancaster, California.

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“I JUST WANT TO GIVE BACK”

The Reintegration of People Sentenced to Life Without Parole

Over the past 30 years, the use of life without parole (LWOP) sentences in the US has grown by an alarming 350 percent. Today, more than 5,000 of the nearly 56,000 men and women sentenced to LWOP in the US are in California—the third most of any US jurisdiction. However, in the past 10 years, around 200 of those sentenced to LWOP in California have, improbably, secured release.

“*I Just Want to Give Back*” highlights the recent and historic release of these individuals, focusing on the positive contributions they are now making to their families and communities. It is based on statistical data from the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, as well as interviews with 110 people formerly sentenced to life without parole in California. The report also includes new recidivism data on all individuals sentenced to LWOP who were subsequently released between 2011 and 2019.

Human Rights Watch concludes that LWOP sentences are unnecessary and counterproductive to public safety and calls on the California state government to end use of the extreme sentence.