

California's Passage of Fair Sentencing Act Sets Stage for Rest of Country



Last month, California Gov. Jerry Brown signed the Fair Sentencing for Youth Act, state Senate Bill 9. This law creates a process to periodically review the progress of individuals sentenced to life without parole for crimes committed as youth, with the possibility of resentencing. It declares to Californians that their children – even those who have committed serious crimes – are better than their worst acts and, therefore, deserve a second chance at life. This is a value I know many Americans share, and it should be a common characteristic of our state laws.

We demonstrated our belief in the inherent redeemability of children when we established a juvenile justice system: a system we made the error of bypassing when a now-disproven theory from the 1980s about [juvenile “superpredators”](#) caused us to start throwing away our children. But, as California and the U.S. Supreme Court earlier this year in *Miller v. Alabama* have shown, the tide is turning.

Enactment of the Fair Sentencing for Youth Act is a landmark victory for California and for our nation –the only country in the world that condemns children to die in prison. It is a modest but important reform that had the support of a diverse array of stakeholders, including [victims' families](#), [prosecutors](#), [child welfare groups](#) and [medical professionals](#). Leaders from across the political spectrum, including former Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, [Newt Gingrich](#),

and former Speaker and current Minority Leader of the House [Nancy Pelosi](#), called on Gov. Brown to enact this legislation. It brings a message of hope to those who were told as young people they were only worthy of certain death in prison.

Extreme sentences, such as life without parole, disproportionately affect low-income youth and [youth of color](#). These sentences contribute to an already-existing sense of hopelessness among many of our children, particularly those who grow up in communities where they are offered few opportunities for quality education and fulfillment of their potential. This deficit of hope, although not an excuse, can contribute to tragic choices. Moreover, sentencing youth to die in prison disregards what every parent knows, and what science has proven: young people, including those convicted of serious crimes, [have a unique capacity to change if given the opportunity](#).

I was inspired to do this work when I witnessed the despair of young people who feel everyone has abandoned them when I volunteered in the juvenile halls in Los Angeles County. I led prayer groups for children facing criminal charges in adult court and in many cases, decades-long sentences in adult prisons. Over time, several of the young people I worked with shared their stories with me. These stories often included incarcerated siblings, parents suffering from drug addiction, homelessness and teachers who had given up on them. I will never forget when a 15-year-old boy looked me in the eyes and told me he had no hope for his life.

The United States of America exists as a beacon of hope to the world, and a leader in upholding individual human rights. But as long as we condemn children to die in prison, we grossly undermine that role. [A broad-based movement](#) comprised of people from various backgrounds and perspectives has united to ensure that we live up to our principles by legislating according to our shared value that children should never be sentenced to die in prison. This coalescence is in line with

our American history of coming together around shared values, regardless of our differences.

As a nation, we have the moral obligation to ensure that youth are held accountable for harm they have caused in an age-appropriate way that gives them hope of a second chance to demonstrate their value and ability to become productive members of our society.