



INTRODUCTION

Welcome to our site.

Our hope is to appeal to your sense of humanity by introducing you to men and women who, as juveniles, were abandoned by Michigan's juvenile justice system and sent to live among adult prisoners.

Violence in prison isn't the exception, it's the norm. Within Michigan's prisons, male and female prisoners are subjected daily to robbery, assault and rape. Here, prisoners must quickly learn either how to defend themselves or live a life of continual victimization. And while adults may be capable of warding themselves against the dangers posed by those bigger, stronger, and wiser than they, imagine the burden a juvenile must bear. In such a place, the age and physical stature of a typical juvenile becomes a curse.

HISTORY

Until late in the 19th century, children who committed crimes were treated as adults and sentenced to adult prisons. Their lives in prison were brutal, hellish, and all too often, short. However, due to reformers known as child savers, states began to separate young offenders from adults and created juvenile courts based upon the philosophy of parens patriae, which makes the state responsible for acting in the best interests of the child. In this system it was presumed that children were salvagable through education and counseling efforts.

This presumption began to change when our nation experienced an increase in violent juvenile crimes in the mid-1980s. Citizen fears were fanned by a prediction made by Princeton University Professor John DiIulio that juvenile "super-predators" would begin to rule the streets. State legislators responded by creating an assembly line process making it easier to deal with the coming wave of juvenile violence (in effect, putting in juvenile express lanes) and by increasing the penalties for juvenile crimes. The pervasive phrase "adult time for adult crime" was recited heavily by politicians campaigning for re-election, and state legislatures passed laws empowering prosecutors to decide which court a juvenile would be tried within; the juvenile court which emphasized treatment; or the adult court which sent youths to adult prisons where no treatment was available. The resulting increase in juvenile life sentences since this time was predictable.

P R E S E N T D A Y

Unfortunately, Professor Dilulio's prediction proved incorrect as juvenile violence began to decline in 1994 until again settling at the mid-1980's level. However, the damage was done. In Michigan, 324 juveniles are now serving a life sentence without the possibility of parole (LWOP) for a crime they committed before they were 18 years old (some were as young as 14). In adult prisons, these juveniles are more likely to be raped, assaulted, or to commit suicide than any other demographic group.

A S Y S T E M O F N E G L E C T

Michigan's legal system has actively engaged in the devaluation of the lives of its children, juveniles whom it is legally bound to protect. The treatment these wayward youth receive within the juvenile justice system falls far short of its parens patriae mandate, and many times the children declared salvagable are, instead, written off and sent to an adult prison. This is especially true of female juvenile offenders.

Why does this occur? The answer is simple: despite the lip service it pays to parens patriae, Michigan has refused, for the last 30 years, to commit the necessary resources to save its children. As a result, judges are often forced to abandon juveniles to the adult system and adult prisons simply because suitable juvenile facilities have not been funded. By any other name, this is an act of negligence, and it must end.

S O L U T I O N

Confining Michigan's juveniles within adult prisons is morally wrong. And the people of the State of Michigan agree. In a survey conducted by the Wayne State University School of Social Work and Center for Urban Studies, 95% of state residents oppose LWOP sentences for its juveniles. So why are these sentences still meted out? Because our Michigan lawmakers haven't yet heard from you.

There are currently bills before the Michigan House of Representatives and Senate that would change Michigan's laws concerning juvenile treatment. These bills, if passed, would prevent any more juveniles from being forced into an adult prison.

As you read this, there are boys and girls as young as 14 being considered for prosecution as adults, juveniles who may soon be subject to the harsh reality of life in an adult prison. We can end their abuse with your help. If you would like to add your voice to this growing J.A.I.L. movement, let us hear from you. Your interest alone will fuel our movement and allow us to include the profiles and stories of more survivors.

It is time to stop this immoral and inhumane process.

AMY LEE BLACK
Juvenile Lifer

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