

Kenza Kamal, Policy Director, Juvenile Justice Coalition  
Written Testimony to the Ohio House Criminal Justice Committee  
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Good morning Chairman Lang, Vice Chair Plummer, Ranking Member Leland, and members of the House Criminal Justice Committee. My name is Kenza Kamal and I am the Policy Director of the Juvenile Justice Coalition, writing to encourage the passage of SB 256.

For juvenile offenders, a mandatory life sentence without the possibility of parole (JLWOP) is unconstitutional. Following the 2012 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Miller v. Alabama* and the 2016 *Montgomery v. Louisiana* decision, states and the federal government are **required to consider the unique circumstances of each juvenile defendant in determining an individualized sentence** and ensure that the decision applies retroactively. It is critical to note that the court made these decisions in cases where violent crimes had been committed, showing that **even under harsh circumstances**, we must consider youth and their ability to change when determining appropriate sentencing.

Much research shows that individuals 'age out' of crime.<sup>1</sup> Research suggests that 16- and 17-year-olds are at their most likely age to make risky decisions because of social, emotional, and neurological development factors.<sup>2</sup> Most youth are unlikely to offend as they get older, and have a high potential for reform and rehabilitation. By eliminating JLWOP, the state rightfully allows the justice system to consider these specific aspects of a youth offender's case.

In seeking justice, our goal should be for people to remedy the harm they have done and to become positively-contributing members of their community. JLWOP wastes the state's resources by being counterproductive to these goals; it gives people a dead-end sentence for wrongs they did as a middle school or high school-aged child or adolescent. Eliminating JLWOP will give people the motivation of possibly eventually reentering society as family members, workers, and citizens. A young person who enters prison before they have entered adulthood, and then spends decades in incarceration, has done **more than sufficient time to at least grant them a parole hearing**.

Opponents of this bill may try to create fear of supposedly-dangerous people being released. However, I ask you to remember that **eliminating JLWOP does not in any way guarantee release** - it simply institutes the opportunity for review of a person's case.

Thank you to the Committee for your attention to this matter. If I can be of further assistance, I can be reached at [kenza@jjohio.org](mailto:kenza@jjohio.org).

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<sup>1</sup> [https://scs.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/6\\_Final\\_Manuscript.pdf](https://scs.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/6_Final_Manuscript.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.mdpi.com/2075-471X/3/4/744/htm>