

**Testimony of Yale College Democrats in support of Bill No. # 5546, Committee on Judiciary, General Assembly, State of Connecticut**

March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2012

My name is Igor Mitschka and I am testifying on behalf of the Yale College Democrats. We urge the Committee on Judiciary of the General Assembly of the State of Connecticut to pass Bill No # 5546 and hope that the bill will ultimately result in more just sentences for juveniles offenders in Connecticut.

Areas of particular concern in Connecticut are life-without-parole-sentences for juveniles. Under current law, a juvenile older than 13 who commits a capital felony will receive a mandatory sentence of life without parole. As of 2008-2010, according to figures of Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and the Equal Justice Initiative, nine people were serving life-without-parole sentences in Connecticut for crimes they had committed as juveniles.

Not wanting to diminish the heinous crimes these offenders have committed, we do believe that a juvenile offender cannot be subjected to practices that are applied to adult offenders. It is proven that juveniles, due to their not yet fully developed maturity, react in a more impulsive way than adults, are more easily subject to peer pressure and sometimes cannot fully understand the consequences of their acts. Consequentially, juveniles bring with them a malleability other offenders cannot in the same way. Juvenile offenders can, due to their young age and their unfinished development, usually more easily be rehabilitated and reintegrated into society than other offenders.

We understand why our society grants greater privileges to children as they grow and mature. Voting, marriage, and driving are all privileges withheld until children are developmentally ready to take on the responsibilities associated with these privileges. But justice requires that we apply this same line of reasoning to the punishment of children's crimes. Such a severe punishment loses all power to deter crime when the juvenile cannot appreciate either the gravity of his or her actions or the indefinite nature of the punishment. The US Supreme Court has followed this argumentation recently when abolishing the death penalty for juvenile offenders and life-without-parole sentences for juvenile offenders in non-homicide cases (*Roper v. Simmons*, 2005; *Graham v. Florida*, 2010). We are now demanding to abolish sentencing juveniles to life without parole in any case.

The United States finds itself as the only democracy in the world where juveniles can be sentenced to life without parole. The Convention on the Rights of the Child clearly states, in Article 37: *"No child shall be subjected to ... cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. Neither capital punishment nor life imprisonment without possibility of release shall be imposed for offences committed by persons below eighteen years of age."*

We believe that time is ripe for Connecticut to account for a full realization of children's rights and to abolish life-without-parole sentences for juveniles. We hope that today's bill will be a first step into this direction.