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S.B. No. 1062 and H.B. No. 6581: In Support

My name is Jacob Wasserman, and I am a current student at Yale University. Little discussed but of great importance, the mandatory sentencing of youth to adult prison terms, most egregiously to life without chance of parole, must end. If justice and fairness is to be the goal of Connecticut's criminal justice system, I urge the General Assembly to pass S.B. No. 1062 and H.B. No. 6581.

Without a doubt, criminal offenders must be punished to the fullest extent of the law, according to their culpability. Importantly, scientific studies have shown time and again that juveniles differ vastly from adults in areas like risk assessment, control of impulses, susceptibility to peer pressure, and mature judgment skills. To hold them to the same standards of culpability and sentencing as adults would be unjust. Indeed, in three cases within seven years, the Supreme Court has ruled that these differences between juveniles and adults must be accounted for in the criminal justice system. The "mitigating qualities of youth," a "condition of life when a person may be most susceptible to influence and to psychological damage" led the justices to strike down mandatory life sentences without chance of parole for juveniles as unconstitutional "cruel and unusual punishment" in their opinion in *Miller v. Alabama*. Juveniles, they agreed, are "less deserving of the most severe punishments" due to their "diminished culpability and greater prospects for reform."

Of the youths affected by this law, a huge majority are African-American or Hispanic. Many of the incarcerated come from abusive and neglectful homes. Domestic violence, poverty, and lack of education are common problems facing these juveniles. However, there is hope: adolescent brain development studies have shown that juveniles have a greater ability to reform as productive members of society. Mandatory sentencing laws which deny even the possibility of parole take away any chance for successful rehabilitation to occur. Indeed, it is astonishing that our nation is the sole democracy in the world where life sentencing without chance of parole for juveniles is allowed.

As a young person myself, I can hardly imagine juveniles younger than myself imprisoned for the rest of their lives, mandatorily and without a possibility of release. The General Assembly needs to pass these bills as soon as possible. The moral, financial, and societal costs of such incarcerations are too pressing to let stand any longer.

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