

-YALE COLLEGE- DEMOCRATS

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March 3, 2014

In favor: H.B. No. 5221

An Act Concerning the Recommendations of the Connecticut Sentencing Commission Regarding Lengthy Sentences for Crimes Committed by a Child or Youth and the Sentencing of a Child or Youth Convicted of Certain Felony Offenses

Juvenile sentencing in Connecticut currently fails the juveniles being sentenced for crimes, their families, all those who may have been victims of crimes committed by juveniles in the state, and the rest of the citizens of the state as a whole. It is a well-known fact that juveniles have greater capacities for self-improvement than adults and also have underdeveloped brains, so sentencing them like adults fails to consider their unique position as juveniles. Furthermore, many of the juveniles who have gone through the juvenile justice system have lived lives full of poverty, violence, and peer pressure. It is unfair to completely and harshly judge juveniles coming from circumstances that nearly encourage participation in illicit activities. This socioeconomic element is only compounded by the fact that minorities are overrepresented in Connecticut's prisons and juvenile detention centers with 92% of juvenile offenders serving 50 or more years identifying as African American or Hispanic. It is impossible to argue that African American and Hispanic juveniles are inherently more likely to commit crimes and it seems that they are more often targeted with longer and harsher sentences and sentenced at higher rates than other juveniles. This is an injustice that needs to be corrected immediately.

The Connecticut Sentencing Commission's recommended legislation would promote the change we need in juvenile sentencing. The proposal prohibits mandatory life sentences without parole for juvenile offenders. Passing this bill would therefore bring Connecticut into compliance with the Supreme Court's ruling, but more importantly, it's the right thing to do, providing overdue recognition of juvenile offenders' right to a second chance. Even if some offenders shouldn't receive parole, it is critical that juveniles receive special consideration within our justice system, which is why they should all at least be eligible for a parole hearing.

As a forward-looking state, Connecticut should be a national trailblazer and show the rest of the nation the many benefits of improved laws concerning juvenile justice. The revision of our existing laws can prove that Connecticut understands the nuances and careful attention needed in juvenile sentencing efforts. Our state needs to rededicate itself to the ideals of juvenile justice. By doing this, we once again can become a national leader and stand at the forefront of American justice.