

Testimony of Aria Thaker and Jessica Garland, Yale Undergraduate
Prison Project (YUPP)

HB 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.

March 11th, 2013

We are Aria Thaker and Jessica Garland, juniors at Yale University. We are, respectively, Activism Chair and Co-President of the Yale Undergraduate Prison Project, and we speak for our organization in support of HB No. 5221, regarding juvenile justice and sentencing reform. This legislation is important not only because it would bring Connecticut into compliance with the Supreme Court's 2012 ruling in *Miller v. Alabama*, but also because it is a crucial step forward towards a fairer, more humane criminal justice system.

In Connecticut, juveniles are still able to receive sentences of life without the possibility of parole. We agree with the Supreme Court's ruling that such punishments violate the Eighth Amendment's ban on cruel and unusual punishment. We also believe this practice is an unjust manifestation of our criminal justice system that must end if we wish to work towards a more equitable society.

Neurological research has shown that juvenile brains are underdeveloped and prone to more impulsive thinking, which can lead to rash, sometimes even tragic decisions. Children who commit crimes are often victims of difficult circumstances, such as severely unstable households or violent, abusive caretakers. Because of these special considerations, denying juveniles a second chance *at just a parole hearing* strikes us as vastly unjust.

Researchers have also shown that harsh adult sentences are not meted out evenly; often, black and Hispanic juvenile offenders are given far harsher sentences than white juvenile offenders. 92% of juvenile offenders serving 50 years or more in prison are either black or Hispanic. It is time to stop pretending that such racial disparities in our criminal justice system are inevitable, and start working towards fixing the pernicious social biases that pervade American sentencing norms.

We believe that the state of Connecticut should take the lead in complying with the Supreme Court's 2012 ruling in support of more just sentencing for juveniles. HB No. 5221 is an opportunity for our state to demonstrate its commitment to human rights and its role as a leader at the vanguard of national justice reform.