

Testimony of Charlotte Finegold  
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205 Elm St, A 13  
New Haven, CT 06511

In favor: S.B. No. 796

An Act Concerning Lengthy Sentences for Crimes Committed By A Child Or Youth And The Sentencing Of A Child Or Youth Convicted Of Certain Felony Offenses

My name is Charlotte Finegold and on behalf of the Yale Undergraduate Prison Project, I urge the committee to pass Senate Bill 796. This proposal, essential to reforming Connecticut's juvenile justice laws, recognizes the we must judge youths' decisions in the context of their neurological development and their backgrounds; it acknowledges that many juvenile offenders come from backgrounds of poverty and violence. As a college student, I am arguably more likely than others to be repulsed by the idea that a decision made under the influence of peer pressure in youth could determine the rest of one's life. Evidently, so are the other 928 Connecticut college students who signed these letters.

The stakes are extremely high for approving this proposal in this legislative session. Last Friday, the Connecticut Supreme Court ruled that it is down to the legislature to decide whether juveniles convicted of life sentences should be granted parole hearings. Furthermore, the future of dozens of men and women depend on the Assembly's decision, as emphasized in *The New Haven Register* profile of Nick Aponte, who is serving 38 years in prison without the possibility of parole.

The Yale Undergraduate Prison Project works with more than 100 students who, like Mr. Aponte, have devoted themselves to their education and deserve a second look. Our organization is based on the humanistic premise that people are capable of self-improvement and should be recognized for turning themselves around. We put these beliefs into action through our G.E.D. tutoring programs in Manson Youth Correctional Institution and at the New Haven Community Correctional Center and through one-on-one mentoring of inmates at Manson Youth Prison and York Correctional Institution.

In the past year, at New Haven's jail, I have tutored men who have been convicted for everything from minor drug offenses to murder. For a few months, I worked with a man who was convicted of homicide at age 17. At age 14, he had dropped out of the classroom and into a gang. The night he was arrested, he had no idea what he was doing. I learned all this after I had led him through sheets of word problems and geometry questions; after I saw him fail the G.E.D. twice, then pass it on his third try; after our discussion on American policy in the Middle East in which we debated how to respond to ISIS. He, like all our students, is channeling his remorse to focus on his education and start over.

I know that I only see these men for a couple hours a week and that I do not know all the details of their cases. But I am not naive in thinking that they deserve to be given a second look. Their stories conform to scientific evidence that shows that those who enter the criminal justice system as

juveniles are more likely to better themselves. If the committee failed to pass this proposal, it would ignore this evidence and the resilience shown by those like Nick Aponte and the Prison Project's students who are committed to contributing, rather than burdening society.

This proposal is remarkably safe; it only supports release for individuals who are thoroughly reviewed by parole boards. It is high time to update Connecticut's sentencing policies so that they align with the 2012 *Miller v. Alabama* Supreme Court ruling and recommendations from the state's bipartisan Sentencing Commission.

As a citizen of Connecticut who wants to see our justice system live up to its name, I strongly encourage the committee to pass Senate Bill 796 as soon as possible.

Thank you for your time.