

MEDIA ALERT

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ILLINOIS LEGISLATURE MOVES TO ABOLISH LIFE WITHOUT PAROLE SENTENCES FOR CHILDREN & YOUNG ADULTS

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The Illinois General Assembly has moved to abolish life without the possibility of parole sentences for children and young adults. With a bipartisan vote, the Illinois Senate today passed [House Bill 1064](#), which would ensure most people sentenced before age 21 can seek a limited parole review. The House approved the measure in April 2021. Restore Justice calls on Governor JB Pritzker to sign HB 1064 into law.

“HB 1064 recognizes that children should be treated differently than adults. In Illinois, we care about our young people, and we know that children have the greatest capacity for change. HB 1064 gives those who would otherwise have no hope of returning to their families a chance to show who they have become,” said Julie Anderson, Restore Justice’s Outreach Director. Anderson’s son originally received a life without parole sentence for a crime that happened when he was just 15. He has since been resentenced because of U.S. Supreme Court decisions.

HB 1064 passed with bipartisan support in each chamber; in the House, Representatives Rita Mayfield (D-Waukegan) and Seth Lewis (R-Bartlett) championed the measure. Senate President Don Harmon (D-Oak Park) moved the measure through his chamber; President Harmon has long been committed to addressing extreme sentencing of young people. He sponsored [House Bill 531](#) (now Public Act 100-1182), the Youthful Parole Law, which Governor Pritzker signed into law in 2019.

“It’s a sliver of hope for an otherwise condemned person under 21 who maybe, just maybe, might redeem themselves decades down the road and warrant consideration for a second chance at society,” President Harmon said.

Senator Donald DeWitte (R-St. Charles) spoke forcefully in favor of redemption during the floor discussion about the bill; we are grateful for his leadership, compassion, and belief in the ability of children to rehabilitate themselves.

"I consider myself a law-and-order Republican, but I also believe in rehabilitation. I believe there are some people who make extremely poor decisions in the very early portions of their lives who deserve consideration once they have met benchmarks and shown they are prepared to become contributing citizens after they have served their debt to society. For these people, we need to offer them hope and let them know we recognize that people can redeem themselves," Senator DeWitte said.

Restore Justice applauds the bill's sponsors and champions for their leadership, their belief in redemption, and their recognition that children and young adults should be treated differently in the criminal legal system. The U.S. Supreme Court has repeatedly recognized that young people's brains are not fully developed and held that children are uniquely capable of change. The majority of states have abolished or stopped using sentences that allow children to die in prison, with no possible review of whether their life sentences advance justice or serve the public interest.

"HB 1064 simply ensures that young people serving extreme sentences will have the opportunity to have a review and be judged on who they have become and how they have grown and changed since their incarceration. All young people deserve this chance to reunite with their families," said James Swansey, Restore Justice's Policy Manager. Swansey received a life without any possibility of parole sentence when he was just 17 years old. He is home because of U.S. Supreme Court decisions that recognized children are different from adults and are uniquely capable of rehabilitation.

The Youthful Parole Law created the first new parole opportunities in Illinois since our state abolished parole for release in 1978. Then-Majority Leader Barbara Flynn Currie (D-Chicago), now a Restore Justice Board member, and then-Representative Lindsay Parkhurst (R-Kankakee) joined President Harmon in sponsoring the Youthful Parole Law. HB 1064 is a natural progression to create more parole opportunities for children and young adults; it extends parole review to young people sentenced to natural life in prison. This aligns Illinois with science, court decisions, and international standards. The Cook County State's Attorney, Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation, and ACLU of Illinois are among supporters of HB 1064.

"No child should spend their life in prison. Every one of us can be greater than the worst thing we have ever done. HB 1064 builds on the national momentum to ensure no children or young adults are sentenced to die in prison without the opportunity for rehabilitation or parole," Restore Justice Policy Director Lindsey Hammond said.

Here is what HB 1064 will do:

- Youth 20 and younger sentenced to natural life and/or convicted of killing a peace officer could petition for a parole review after serving at least 40 years.
- Youth convicted of predatory criminal sexual assault of a child are excluded under this bill.

The 2019 Youthful Parole Law established:

- Most children and emerging adults (under age 21) given long terms of incarceration would have the opportunity to go before the Prisoner Review Board after 10 years and would then be allowed to seek parole two more times—unless they’ve been convicted of one of a handful of crimes (exceptions outlined below).
- Youth convicted of aggravated criminal sexual assault and most forms of first-degree murder would be eligible for parole after 20 years and once more after another 10 years.

Restore Justice, which comprises [Restore Justice Foundation](#) and [Restore Justice Illinois](#), works to address issues faced by those serving life or de-facto life sentences, their families, and their communities. Founded in 2015 by a dedicated group of advocates that included the late former Congressman, Federal Judge, and White House Counsel Abner Mikva, Restore Justice trains and supports advocates, conducts research, nurtures partnerships, and develops policy solutions that will roll back ineffective “tough on crime” policies of the past, replacing them with compassionate, smart, and safe policies for the future.