



ACLU Finds Parole Nearly Impossible for Prisoners Who Committed Serious Crimes as Youth^[1]

Report shows parole boards failing to release these prisoners, despite years of rehabilitation and evidence that they pose no risk to society

NEW YORK — In a new report analyzing parole for prisoners who committed serious crimes as youth, the American Civil Liberties Union found that parole boards across the country rarely release these prisoners, unnecessarily prolonging their incarceration for decades, despite their rehabilitation and even when they pose no risk to the public's safety.

“False Hope: How Parole Systems Fail Youth Serving Extreme Sentences” is an unprecedented look at how the thousands of prisoners who committed serious crimes as youth fare in state parole systems. Using interviews with 124 prisoners and in-depth analysis of parole processes across the country, the report shows that parole boards place so much emphasis on the crime that other factors, like youth at the time of the crime and subsequent change and rehabilitation, are routinely disregarded. As a result, even model prisoners who can safely return to their families and communities spend unnecessary decades behind bars.

“Thanks to the Supreme Court, more and more prisoners who committed serious crimes when they were young but have since grown, atoned, and changed are eligible for parole. But now these prisoners face a parole system that is stacked against them,” said Sarah Mehta, human rights researcher at the ACLU and author of the report. “We must change the parole system so that these prisoners get a fair shot at freedom.”

The report offers profiles of prisoners who, despite their exemplary disciplinary records, participation in rehabilitation programs, strong job performance, multiple educational accomplishments, and family support, have been denied release as many as 17 times, waiting 1-24 years before the next review.

John Alexander is serving life with the possibility of parole for killing a young man during a fight when he was 18. He is now 54. About the man he shot, he says, “His family won’t be spending birthdays with him. There are so many things he could have done and never will because of me. That is where my deepest regret is.” In his 36 years in prison, he has completed multiple educational programs, prison staff say he is a role model for other prisoners with an exemplary disciplinary record, and the judge who sentenced him supports his parole. Alexander has been denied for parole six times since 1992.

“Our states’ parole boards lag behind the Supreme Court and human rights law by continuing to needlessly incarcerate people for the rest of their lives who were young at the time of their crimes,” said Mehta. “Parole reviews must include consideration of a prisoner’s age at the time of the offense. Otherwise, we are wasting people’s lives for nothing.”

Studies show that people age out of criminal activity, no matter how serious the offense.

With particular attention to Iowa, Massachusetts, Michigan, New York, and Texas, “False Hope” outlines the deep flaws in the parole system that work against prisoners like John Alexander who have worked for redemption and are seeking release, sometimes after decades in prison.

“A prisoner’s parole review may last just five or ten minutes. That isn’t enough time to read a prisoner’s file, let alone evaluate it,” said Mehta. “With the power they have over people’s lives, parole boards need more resources and support to do the job right.”

Most parole hearings have none of the due-process protections of a trial. For example, prisoners may not know what criteria the parole board uses to determine who is released and rarely have legal assistance. They don’t receive explanations when they are denied. In some states, prisoners don’t even get a hearing or an interview before the parole board at all.

The report includes recommendations to bring fairness, transparency, and effectiveness to parole processes nationwide, changes that would affect prisoners who committed serious crimes as youth as well as the wider prisoner population. It also proposes sentencing reforms.

For the full report:

<https://www.aclu.org/report/report-false-hope-how-parole-systems-fail-youth-serving-extreme-sentences> ^[2]

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