Juvenile Lifers and Juveniles in Michigan Prisons: A Population of Special Concern

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JUVENILE LIFERS AND JUVENILES IN MICHIGAN PRISONS
A POPULATION OF SPECIAL CONCERN

By Kimberly Thomas

Deep Sense of Need by Bryan Picken
Prisoners serving life without parole for offenses they committed when they were juveniles have received much attention after the United States Supreme Court found in *Miller v. Alabama* that mandatory life without parole for juveniles violated the Eighth Amendment and found that its *Miller* decision applied retroactively. Courts have begun the process of sentencing and resentencing these individuals, some of whom are still teens and some of whom have served 40 years or more in the Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC). All told, not including new cases that come before the court, approximately 370 prisoners will receive individualized sentences under the state laws enacted to implement *Miller* and *Montgomery v. Louisiana*. This article examines a few ways in which federal and state corrections law and corrections policy affect this population.

In one report, approximately 4,000 individuals in Michigan were imprisoned for crimes committed before age 18. Over the past year or two, the number of individuals 17 or younger within MDOC has ranged from approximately 75 to almost 90. Male youth are often placed at the Thumb Correctional Facility, which has one youthful offender unit with approximately 120 beds. Youthful female offenders are housed in the Huron Valley Women's Facility, which is not youth specific and is the only women’s facility in Michigan.

**Federal and state laws affecting juvenile and young adult prisoners**

Federal and state laws affect whether individuals who are still juveniles involved in the criminal justice system can be housed with a general adult population. The Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act states that as a condition of receiving some federal funding, juveniles may not be housed with adults on the basis of delinquency adjudications; and that juveniles convicted in federal court may not be placed or retained in an adult jail or correctional institution in which they have regular contact with incarcerated adults.

Additional restrictions on the housing of juvenile prisoners are found in the Prison Rape Elimination Act, which has a “sight and sound” restriction requiring the separation of youthful inmates from adult inmates. Restrictions that permit placement of juveniles in adult county jails but require sight and sound separation are also codified in state law. MDOC does not have a separate policy directive specifically addressing youthful offenders in prison.

A particular concern for youthful inmates is the use of solitary confinement or segregation, either as a disciplinary measure or as an unintended consequence of a lack of appropriate facilities.

Solitary confinement is associated with severe harm to physical and mental health among both youth and adults, including increased risk of self-mutilation and suicidal ideation;

1. A particular concern for youthful inmates is the use of solitary confinement or segregation, either as a disciplinary measure or as an unintended consequence of a lack of appropriate facilities.

2. The effect of MDOC policy is that lifers, including juveniles serving unconstitutional mandatory life without parole sentences, are less likely to have access to programming, especially during their formative early years in prison.

By some estimates, about a third of juveniles in custody report being in solitary confinement for some length of time. A 2016 U.S. Department of Justice report called for eliminating the use of restrictive housing for juveniles. The DOJ also recommended the minimal use of restrictive housing for young adults and the provision of “developmentally responsive policies and practices” which recognize that brain and psychosocial development continues in the early to mid-20s.

Another concern is that youth are disproportionately subject to abuse and sexual assault in prison. In 2013, a class-action lawsuit, *John Doe v Michigan Department of Corrections*, was filed in Michigan on behalf of more than 500 youthful prisoners ages 14 to 17, alleging that these inmates “have been or will be subjected to sexual and physical assaults and abuse, sexual harassment, and degrading treatment from adult prisoners as a result of incarceration in adult prisons.” Partial summary judgment was granted, but the lawsuit was still pending as of July 2017.

**Juvenile lifers and access to programming in prison**

An area of attention is the education and programming available to juveniles and juvenile lifers in MDOC even after they have become adults.

Generally, MDOC requires any inmate serving two years or more to complete his or her GED before being paroled. Additional federal laws require the educational services provided to juveniles and young adults with disabilities. For these inmates, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (as amended) obligate...
Federal and state laws affect whether individuals who are still juveniles involved in the criminal justice system can be housed with a general adult population.

MDOC to provide educational services to eligible youth in confinement. Some of these requirements are also ensured by MDOC regulation.

MDOC policy and the availability of programming at any particular facility also affect the work and rehabilitation opportunities available to youthful inmates and inmates sentenced to life without parole for offenses committed when they were juveniles. MDOC prioritizes access to facility programming—such as its Violence Prevention Program, Thinking for a Change, and Substance Abuse Education—by earliest release date, which is the first possible parole date. This prioritization means that lifers, including juveniles serving unconstitutional mandatory life without parole sentences who have not yet been resentenced, are less likely to have access to these programs, especially during their formative early years in prison. Based in part on research showing the continuing development of young adults, the legislature recently amended the corrections code to require development of rehabilitation plans for prisoners aged 18–22 that take age into account and provide for youth rehabilitation programming, to the extent the department is able to do so.

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ENDNOTES

4. MCL 764.27a and MCL 764.27a (allowing confinement in the county jail, but requiring that the youth “shall be held physically separate from adult prisoners”); see also MCL 712A 18h (juvenile code provision); MCL 750.139 (stating that children under 16 while under arrest or convicted shall not be in a cell with or in a transport vehicle with adults charged or convicted of a crime).


14. Id. at pp 59–60, 102.
15. National Prison Rape Elimination Act Commission Report (June 2009), pp 155–156 (“In terms of risk for sexual abuse while in confinement, youth incarcerated in adult prisons and jails are probably at the highest risk of all”, also noting “the extreme risk of sexual victimization for youth in adult facilities”).