

OVERVIEW

In the United States, the federal government and every state enforces sentencing laws that incarcerate people for lengths that will exceed, or likely exceed, the span of a person’s natural life. In 2024, almost 200,000 people, or one in six people in prison, were serving life sentences.¹ The criminal legal system’s dependence on life sentences disregards research showing that extreme sentences are not an effective public safety solution.

This report represents The Sentencing Project’s sixth national census of people serving life sentences, which includes life with the possibility of parole; life without the possibility of parole; and virtual life sentences (sentences reaching 50 years or longer). The report finds more people were serving life without parole (LWOP) in 2024 than ever before: **56,245 people** were serving this “death by incarceration” sentence, a 68% increase since 2003. While the total number of people serving life sentences **decreased 4%** from 2020 to 2024, this decline trails the 13% downsizing of the total prison population. Moreover, **nearly half the states** had more people serving a life sentence in 2024 than in 2020.

The large number of people serving life sentences raises critical questions about moral, financial, and justice-related consequences that must be addressed by the nation as well as the states. We believe the findings and recommendations documented in this report will contribute to better criminal legal policy decisions and a more humane and effective criminal legal system.

KEY NATIONAL FINDINGS

- One in six people in U.S. prisons is serving a life sentence (16% of the prison population, or **194,803 people**)—a proportion that has reached an all-time high even as crime rates are near record lows.
- The United States makes up roughly 4% of the world population but holds an estimated 40% of the world’s life-sentenced population, including 83% of persons serving LWOP.
- More people are serving life without parole in 2024 than ever: **56,245 people**, a 68% increase since 2003.
- Despite a 13% decline in the total reported prison population from 2020 to 2024, the total number of people serving life sentences decreased by only 4%.
- Nearly half of people serving life sentences are Black, and racial disparities are the greatest with respect to people sentenced to life without parole.
- A total of **97,160 people** are serving sentences of life with parole.
- Life sentences reaching 50 years or more, referred to as “virtual life sentences,” account for **41,398 people** in prison.
- Persons aged 55 and older account for nearly two-fifths of people serving life.
- One in every 11 women in prison is serving a life sentence.
- Almost 70,000 individuals serving life were under 25—youth and “emerging adults”—at the time of their offense.² Among these, nearly one-third have no opportunity for parole.
- Racial disparities in life imprisonment are higher among those who were under 25 at the time of their offense compared to those who were 25 and older.

KEY JURISDICTIONAL FINDINGS

- More than half the states *increased* their life without parole (LWOP) populations in the past four years. The number of people serving LWOP is highest in **Florida** (10,915), **California** (5,111), **Pennsylvania** (5,059), **Louisiana** (3,900), and **Michigan** (3,551); these five states combined account for half the people serving LWOP nationwide.
- The 1.2% increase in the LWOP population nationally includes notable *decreases* in the following states and in the federal system:
 - Louisiana (↓ 473 people)
 - Michigan (↓ 331 people)
 - Pennsylvania (↓ 316 people)
 - Federal (↓ 452 people)
- In seven states—**Alabama, California, Colorado, Georgia, Massachusetts, Montana,** and **Utah**—more than one in four Black people in prison is serving a life sentence.
- Thirty-five states and the federal government reported *fewer* people in 2024 serving life with parole (LWP) compared to 2020. Notable decreases in this population occurred in these states:
 - California (↓ 3,765 people)
 - New York (↓ 1,404 people)
 - Nevada (↓ 410 people)
 - Michigan (↓ 401 people)
- States that rely heavily on virtual life sentences are led by **Indiana**, with 16% of its prison population—nearly 4,000 people—serving virtual life. In **Alaska, Montana, Nebraska,** and **Tennessee**, 10% or more of those in prison are serving virtual life terms.
- In **Michigan**, 56% of the total life-sentenced population are age 55 or older; three-quarters of the 55 and over population are serving LWOP.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Abolish life without parole (LWOP) sentences.** LWOP sentences ignore the rehabilitation of individuals who have changed over time; as such, LWOP sentences deny a person’s humanity and are cruel, in addition to being ineffective.
- **Cap imprisonment at 20 years** for crimes committed by adults, except for unusual circumstances, and at 15 years for youth and emerging adults.
- **Extend juvenile sentencing protections to emerging adults** in acknowledgment of their ongoing cognitive development and reduced culpability.
- **Institute an automatic sentence review process,** or second-look mechanism, within 10 years of imprisonment, which includes a rebuttable presumption of resentencing.
- **Revamp parole boards and reform the parole process** to accelerate parole reviews for people serving long-term sentences. An increase in transparency and expertise among parole board members will lead to fairer decisions focused on assessing personal transformation and promoting community safety.
- **End stacked sentences.** Consecutive prison sentences that effectively serve as life terms are as problematic as statutorily defined life sentences. Such sentences can obscure the extensive burden that lengthy imprisonment terms place on the prison system, and contribute to the expansion of mass incarceration and its racial disparities.