

Reentry After Serving Life Without Parole for Individuals Sentenced as Juveniles and Emerging Adults

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Introduction

Each year across the United States, roughly 650,000 people leave prison and return home (U.S. Attorney's Office, Eastern District of Pennsylvania, 2024). Among them are people sentenced to life without parole as adolescents—one of the most overlooked populations in criminal justice reform. These individuals face distinct developmental, social, and economic challenges that, without effective reentry services, put them at risk of falling into cycles of poverty, housing instability, and social exclusion, despite their potential to contribute meaningfully to their communities (Bennett et al., 2025).

In Michigan, justice system reforms have resulted in the release of people who entered prison as adolescents and are now returning to their communities after decades behind bars. Detroit is a critical context for this work, as Wayne County historically imposed a disproportionate share of juvenile life without parole (JLWOP) sentences (Nellis, 2012). As these individuals return to their communities following resentencing, Michigan—and Detroit in particular—offers a key opportunity to study reentry after long-term incarceration beginning in adolescence (Rayes et al., 2025; SADO, 2025). The resulting place-specific evidence will have clear implications for policy, practice, and community-led solutions.

The Detroit Enhanced Reentry Project seeks to contribute to the development of supports needed and requested by individuals sentenced to life without the possibility of parole (LWOP) for offenses committed as juveniles (under age 18) or as emerging adults (approximately ages 18–25).

Throughout this brief, we refer to this population as **individuals formerly serving juvenile or emerging adult LWOP sentences**. Where abbreviation is useful, we use **EA-LWOP** to denote this inclusive group, informed by developmental and neuroscientific research demonstrating substantial continuity in development across adolescence and emerging adulthood. When legal distinctions are relevant, we specify **juvenile LWOP** or **emerging adult LWOP** explicitly.

The current study consists of over 20 qualitative interviews with individuals formerly serving juvenile or emerging adult LWOP sentences, interviews with legal professionals, and Detroit-based community forums designed to inform future work and learn directly from those most affected. The Detroit Enhanced Reentry Project seeks to expand understanding of this distinct population and provide meaningful recommendations to serve this resilient community.

The American Institutes for Research (AIR) team developed this brief as part of the [Detroit Enhanced Reentry Project](#), drawing on legal, developmental, and justice literature examining the incarceration experiences and reentry needs of individuals sentenced to life without the possibility of parole (LWOP) for offenses committed as juveniles (under age 18) or as emerging adults (approximately ages 18–25). After spending decades incarcerated, this population—often referred to as “returning neighbors”—is coming home to Detroit communities. While grounded in the Detroit context, this brief is intended to inform broader national conversations as states across the country implement juvenile and emerging adult sentencing reform and confront the reentry needs of individuals released after long-term incarceration. The findings may be used by justice system professionals, reentry service providers, policymakers, and funders to strengthen reentry policy and practice for this distinct population at both local and national levels.

Historical and Legal Context of Youth Life-Without-Parole Sentencing

Prior to the 2012 U.S. Supreme Court’s decision declaring juvenile mandatory life sentences without the possibility of parole unconstitutional (*Miller v. Alabama*), national criminal justice policy was shaped by the 1995 “super predator” myth, which portrayed some youth as uniquely violent and irredeemable (Dilulio, 1995; Equal Justice Initiative, 2014). This narrative drove widespread legislative change that expanded the prosecution of children in adult court. By the early 2000s, more than 2,500 individuals nationwide were serving JLWOP sentences for crimes committed before the age of 18 (Equal Justice Initiative, 2014). In Michigan, Detroit/Wayne County alone accounted for approximately 40% of JLWOP sentences imposed on minors, 93% of which were being served by Black children, reflecting stark racial disparities in sentencing (Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth, 2024; Fair Punishment Project, 2016).

Exhibit 1. Landmark Supreme Court Cases Shaping Youth Life-Without-Parole Sentencing

<i>Roper v. Simmons</i> (1993)	<i>Graham v. Alabama</i> (2003)	<i>Miller v. Alabama</i> (2012)	<i>Montgomery v. Louisiana</i> (2016)
Ruling: Sentencing minors to the death penalty violates the Eighth Amendment.	Ruling: It is unconstitutional to sentence minors to death for <i>non-homicidal offenses</i> .	Ruling: Sentencing minors to life without the possibility of parole (LWOP) violates the Eighth Amendment.	Ruling: Minors sentenced to LWOP can have their cases reviewed for resentencing.

Since then, a few landmark Supreme Court rulings have changed the justice system landscape. In [Miller v. Alabama](#) (2012), the Supreme Court held that mandatory JLWOP sentencing violated the Eighth Amendment’s prohibition against cruel and unusual punishment. This ruling was made retroactive in

[Montgomery v. Louisiana](#) (2016), prompting Michigan to begin resentencing and releasing individuals who had received JLWOP sentences prior to 2016. These rulings marked a significant shift in constitutional and policy approaches to youth sentencing, but left unresolved questions about the long-term effects of prolonged incarceration beginning in adolescence.

The [Supreme Court's ruling](#) in *Miller v. Alabama* (2012) signaled a paradigm shift, grounding legal culpability in neuroscientific evidence demonstrating that young people's neurological pathways are still developing (American Psychological Association et al., 2012; Strubakos, 2025). The neuroscientific research indicates that development of the prefrontal cortex—which is critical for impulse control, planning, and decision-making—continues into the mid-20s (Hochberg & Konner, 2020; Kolk & Rakic, 2022). During emerging adulthood (ages 18–25), regulatory control over emotion- and reward-driven brain systems is still strengthening, which may contribute to heightened impulsivity in emotionally charged or high-risk situations, compared to fully mature adults (Hochberg & Konner, 2020). This body of research demonstrates that, developmentally, the brains of emerging adults are similar to those of adolescents under the age of 18, challenging the legal assumption that age 18 represents a meaningful biological boundary of adulthood. This understanding was explicitly acknowledged in *Miller v. Alabama*, underpinning growing recognition of emerging adulthood as a distinct life stage connected to mid-adolescence. This brief examines the incarceration experiences and reentry needs of individuals sentenced to life without parole before age 26 (a group referred to here as emerging adult – life without parole [EA-LWOP]), consistent with this neurodevelopmental science.

Despite increased legal attention following *Miller v. Montgomery* (2012) and *Montgomery v. Louisiana* (2016), which prompted the release of hundreds of individuals sentenced to JLWOP, empirical research on the incarceration experiences and reentry needs of this population remains limited (Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth, 2024; Sbeglia et al., 2024). Existing scholarship has largely focused on the constitutionality, prevalence, and demographic patterns of these sentences (Rovner, 2023; Nellis, 2012), offering far less insight into how decades of incarceration during critical developmental periods shape institutional adjustment, psychosocial development, and reentry trajectories later in life (Abrams et al., 2023; Bennett et al., 2025).

In response to this gap, this brief synthesizes legal, developmental, and empirical research to examine the incarceration experiences and reentry needs of individuals formerly sentenced to juvenile LWOP. The brief situates the EA-LWOP population within the research on emerging adulthood, which emphasizes ongoing neurological, psychosocial, and identity development into the mid-20s (Arnett, 2000, 2004); examines how prolonged incarceration beginning in adolescence shapes development and institutional adjustment (Daftary-Kapur et al., 2022; Haney, 2003); and highlights key challenges encountered during reentry after extreme sentences (Huppert et al., 2025; Schill, 2024). The brief concludes by identifying implications for reentry policy, practice, and community-based supports aimed at promoting successful reintegration for this distinct population.

Reentry After Prisonization: Adult Expectations Without Proper Preparation

People sentenced to EA-LWOP learned coping strategies required to survive in prison environments but rarely have opportunities to develop the skills needed for adulthood in the community. As a result, reentry often involves navigating adult expectations around autonomy, relationships, and decision-making, without the preparation typically gained through education, employment, family roles, and community life. The work of reentry, therefore, is not simply reintegration, but relearning how to live under conditions that differ fundamentally from those shaping survival inside prison.

People sentenced to EA-LWOP entered prison during critical periods of social, emotional, and cognitive development, and were immediately immersed in adult, hypermasculine, carceral environments (Canlione & Abrams, 2021). As youth, they entered a prison environment where survival depended on toughness, emotional suppression, and constant vigilance (Cesaroni et al., 2023). They endured prisonization—a form of institutionalization involving the internalization of prison norms, values, and survival behaviors—at a formative stage of identity development, replacing normative adolescent socialization with carceral coping strategies (Jewkes, 2005).

During incarceration, individuals formerly serving EA-LWOP sentences were routinely excluded from educational, vocational, and therapeutic programming (Canlione & Abrams, 2021). Rehabilitation opportunities were largely nonexistent, and social learning occurred almost entirely within the prison environment (West, 2024). Over decades, their confinement could lead to deep levels of *prisonization*, characterized by dependence on rigid routines, limited autonomy, and few opportunities to practice independent decision-making or self-regulation (Haney, 2001). Daily life was tightly controlled, with little discretion over basic activities such as eating, sleeping, or movement, reinforcing passivity and reliance on external authority (Adams, 1992).

These conditions not only shape daily behavior and identity formation but also have lasting consequences for cognitive and psychological functioning. The psychological effects of prisonization are compounded by the erosion of decision-making capacity (Haney, 2001; Schnittker, 2014). Prolonged exposure to environments with severely restricted choices undermines confidence in autonomous decision-making, leaving individuals vulnerable to anxiety, indecision, or paralysis when confronted with ordinary choices. This dynamic is illustrated by Haney’s “cereal aisle” phenomenon, which describes the distress and cognitive overload formerly incarcerated individuals may experience when faced with an abundance of everyday options—such as selecting cereal from among numerous brands in a grocery store—after years of having even the most basic decisions made for them (Haney, 2001). When overwhelmed, individuals who have experienced prisonization often rely on coping strategies learned during incarceration, retreating into isolation or responding with aggression (Haney, 2001).

Chronic overcrowding and the near absence of privacy further shape interpersonal development within carceral environments (Haney, 2015; Sykes, 2007). Individuals are routinely forced to navigate constant physical proximity, surveillance, and unwanted intrusion—conditions that heighten tension and increase the perceived risk of interpersonal conflict (Haney, 2001, 2006). In response, many learn to rely on physical presence, vigilance, and blunt or forceful communication as a primary means of self-protection and boundary enforcement (Crewe, 2011; Sykes, 2007). While adaptive within prison contexts, these strategies undermine the development of healthy interpersonal boundaries and limit opportunities to practice emotional regulation, mutual trust, and reciprocal communication (Crewe, 2011; Haney, 2003). Over time, these adaptations contribute to enduring difficulties with vulnerability, trust, intimacy, and constructive interpersonal exchange, particularly after release, when these prison-learned behaviors mismatched to non-carceral social environments (Haney, 2001; Monahan et al., 2009).

Constant vigilance is initially necessary for survival in overcrowded and threatening prison environments but often hardens into **hypervigilance** as a trauma-based response (Haney, 2001). Over time, heightened threat perception, persistent arousal, and reliance on defensive coping strategies (such as social withdrawal or aggression) become ingrained adaptations to confinement, including loss of autonomy, security, and privacy (Sykes, 2007). While adaptive during incarceration, these patterns carry significant psychological costs after release, impairing trust, vulnerability, communication, and daily functioning in the community (Haney, 2001, 2003). Together, these dynamics reflect prolonged and developmentally disruptive processes of prisonization that align with **Post-Incarceration Syndrome**, a trauma-informed framework describing the enduring psychological, relational, and functional consequences of incarceration (Haney, 2001).

The experiences described here are primarily those of men formerly serving EA-LWOP sentences, as most research focuses on individuals incarcerated in predominantly male prison environments (Sentencing Project, 2023). Women’s incarceration experiences—shaped by distinct institutional cultures, gendered relational dynamics, and disproportionately high rates of trauma and abuse—remain largely absent from the literature on individuals formerly serving juvenile or emerging adult LWOP sentences (Bloom et al., 2003; Messina et al., 2014). This gap represents an important area for future research and policy attention to ensure that reentry strategies are responsive to the experiences and needs of women returning to the community after extreme sentences.

Intentionally Designing Reentry Services to Promote Developmental Stability

In this brief, we draw on developmental and justice literature to describe a distinct set of reentry needs among individuals formerly serving EA-LWOP sentences. Their experiences are characterized by decades of incarceration during critical developmental periods and prolonged separation from family and community. They face persistent challenges with social integration and skill building (Haney, 2001; Monahan et al., 2009) due to limited exposure to normative adult environments, underscoring the importance of structured engagement and peer-based support (Bennett et al., 2025; Treitler et al., 2025).

Reentry services are offered to ease the transition from prison to the community. Common reentry services include residential stability, job placement, and behavioral health supports, along with additional social supports.

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Reentry policies and services play a critical role in supporting individuals sentenced to EA-LWOP when they return to the community. Reentry policies—such as the Second Chance Act—shape the funding streams, eligibility criteria, and systemic priorities that govern reentry efforts, while reentry services deliver the concrete supports individuals rely on as they transition from prison to the community. Both should be developed to respond to the needs of those imprisoned during adolescence and emerging adulthood, as they face unique challenges when reentering society after prolonged incarceration during key developmental years. Intentionally designed services may help these individuals achieve economic stability, emotional well-being, good health, and meaningful social connections. Drawing on developmental research and studies of incarceration and reentry, we suggest evidence-informed considerations for designing reentry policies and services for returning neighbors formerly serving juvenile or emerging adult LWOP sentences.



Design reentry services to be developmentally responsive to disruptions in psychosocial development resulting from incarceration beginning in adolescence or emerging adulthood

(Erickson & Schaefer, 2020; Steinberg, 2004). Unlike individuals incarcerated later in adulthood, people sentenced to EA-LWOP entered prison before they had opportunities to develop foundational social, emotional, and decision-making skills, typically acquired through education, employment, family and peer relationships, and community engagement (Casey et al., 2020; Cauffman et al., 2023). Instead, their social development occurred almost exclusively within a carceral environment, shaping patterns of communication, boundary setting, and coping that are poorly aligned with life in the community (Monahan et al., 2009). For instance, Herbert et al. (2015) found that individuals who had been incarcerated for long periods often experienced high rates of housing insecurity. Factors such as limited employment opportunities, weak support systems, poor mental and physical health, and difficulties reintegrating with family all contribute to the strong link between reentry and housing instability.



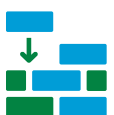
Adopt trauma-informed frameworks to craft reentry policies and services that recognize how prolonged exposure to prison-based trauma shapes cognitive, emotional, and behavioral functioning.

Individuals who served EA- LWOP sentences were conditioned to environments where daily decisions—when to eat, sleep, move, or interact—were externally controlled. As a result, they often experience difficulty making decisions, regulating emotions, and navigating unstructured environments upon release, and may revert to prison-based trauma responses when confronted with stress due to limited alternative coping mechanisms (Haney, 2001). These responses can undermine employment retention, social integration, and family reunification if not addressed through trauma-informed reentry support (Haney, 2001).



Shape reentry policies and practices for EA-LWOP to address the long-term impacts of prolonged family separation and incorporate family-inclusive approaches.

A defining feature of incarceration beginning in adolescence and emerging adulthood is prolonged separation from family and supportive social networks during adolescence and early adulthood. Adolescence and early adulthood are periods when familial relationships play a central role in emotional regulation, identity formation, and social learning (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019). Decades of incarceration often weaken or sever relationships with parents, siblings, partners, and extended family members (Bennett et al., 2025). Upon release, many people who served EA-LWOP sentences must navigate reentry without the family support systems that typically buffer stress, facilitate housing stability, support employment, and promote reintegration (Haney, 2001). Rebuilding family relationships after decades of separation presents challenges related to trust, uncertainty about family roles, emotional distance, and unresolved trauma, both for returning individuals and their family members (Haney, 2001).



Create reentry policies to support healing from the long-term physical and mental health harms associated with extended incarceration among individuals formerly serving juvenile and emerging adult LWOP sentences.

Prolonged incarceration takes a toll on the body. Research shows higher rates of chronic hypertension and heart disease linked to sustained “fight or flight” responses and poor prison diets, as well as increased rates of adult depression and suicidality compared to individuals who were never incarcerated (Barnert et al., 2017). Trauma also manifests as extreme hypervigilance and social withdrawal, contributing to isolation at levels distinct from those observed among individuals incarcerated later in life (Ezell et al., 2020).



Include technological training in reentry services so that returning neighbors can navigate an increasingly digital world.

Individuals formerly serving EA-LWOP sentences experience disconnection from the digital world during a period of rapid technological advancement. This digital divide positions them among the most disadvantaged groups in the digital age, as they reenter a world where technology is essential for daily living, including employment, housing, and communication. Without exposure to modern tools and systems, these individuals face significant barriers to reintegration, including difficulty navigating online job and housing applications, accessing digital services, and adapting to a technology-driven society (Hwang et al., 2024).

Accordingly, effective reentry for individuals formerly serving EA-LWOP sentences requires developmentally responsive, trauma-informed, family-inclusive approaches that address delayed psychosocial development, health needs, and the long-term impacts of prolonged family separation, alongside traditional reentry supports such as housing, employment, and health care. Tailoring reentry strategies to this population is essential to promote long-term public safety, economic stability, strong social support, and physical and emotional well-being.

Offering Structured Peer Support Is a Promising Reentry Practice

Evidence from a limited but growing body of research suggests that peer support plays an important role in reentry after long-term incarceration (Treitler et al., 2025). A pilot randomized controlled trial by Sells et al. (2020) found that individuals with a moderate to high risk of recidivism—defined as a return to the criminal legal system after release—who received peer mentorship alongside standard reentry services experienced lower recidivism than those receiving standard services alone. While this is promising, it highlights the need for larger and longer term studies to clarify mechanisms of impact.

In Sells et al. (2020), peer support was delivered through structured one-to-one mentorship provided by individuals with lived experience of incarceration—often referred to as credible messengers—who were affiliated with community-based peer service organizations. Mentorship was offered during the early post-release period, in addition to standard reentry services, for individuals with moderate to high risk of recidivism. The peer mentoring model emphasized relationship quality and trust, early intervention, criminal desistance, social navigation of community systems, and fostering “gainful citizenship” by supporting participants’ development of prosocial roles and identities, rather than providing clinical treatment or replacing formal reentry services.

Qualitative research with individuals formerly serving juvenile LWOP sentences provides important context for understanding quantitative patterns in reentry outcomes, particularly related to social support. Bennett et al. (2025) found that many participants were unable to maintain family ties due to the length and conditions of incarceration and instead relied on peer bonds formed through shared carceral experiences for emotional support during reentry. These findings help explain why narrowly defined measures of reentry success—such as employment and housing stability—may fail to capture critical determinants of well-being, highlighting the central role of social-emotional support (Bennett et al., 2025). Furthermore, a broader scoping review by Treitler et al. (2025) found that peer support services were associated with improved post-release health and well-being outcomes, though the authors noted that few studies used designs capable of establishing causal effects. Taken together, these findings underscore both the promise of peer-based supports and the need for more rigorous research that integrates lived experience with outcome-focused evidence.

Structured Peer Support Is Underway in Detroit

Craig Whilby is a leader of [Enter Great313](#), a Detroit-based peer support initiative serving individuals returning to the community after long-term incarceration. Sentenced at age 17 to life without the possibility of parole, Whilby served 31 years in prison before being released in 2019 following Michigan’s resentencing reforms for individuals sentenced to juvenile LWOP. Enter Great313 hosts weekly peer support meetings that draw up to 70 participants, most of whom have served extreme sentences, including LWOP. Community members without incarceration histories also regularly participate, reinforcing connections between returning neighbors and the broader community.

According to Whilby, this peer support model emerged organically from relationships formed during incarceration and reflects a shared commitment to supporting others who were “similarly situated” (personal communication, April 22, 2026). Individuals incarcerated from adolescence into midlife or later adulthood often return to the community facing stigma, social isolation, and limited guidance (C. Whilby, personal communication, April 22, 2026). Peer mentors who have lived experience with long-term incarceration—often recognized as credible messengers—play a critical role by modeling reintegration, offering practical insight, and demonstrating that prosocial, community-engaged lives are achievable after extreme sentences.

Whilby further emphasizes that peer mentoring is both deeply relational and restorative (personal communication, April 22, 2026). Enter Great313’s approach is voluntary, noncoercive, and grounded in acceptance, creating a space where formerly incarcerated individuals feel welcomed rather than judged. Whilby believes that for those released after 30 or 40 years, this sense of belonging helps counteract decades of exclusion by the justice system and supports the reconstruction of identity as contributing community members (personal communication, April 22, 2026). At the same time, mentoring is mutually reinforcing; providing support enables mentors to give back to communities they believe they once harmed, while cultivating a renewed sense of purpose. This reciprocal dynamic highlights why peer mentoring is particularly well suited to address the social-emotional dimensions of reentry for individuals released after juvenile and emerging adult life sentences—dimensions that are often overlooked by reentry frameworks focused narrowly on employment and housing outcomes.

Toward Enhanced Reentry Services

Despite decades of incarceration, individuals formerly serving juvenile LWOP sentences demonstrate significant resilience learned from survival, adaptation, and persistence under extreme conditions (Bennett et al., 2025). From an early age, they learned to navigate highly restrictive environments that demanded constant vigilance, emotional regulation, and self-control, often in the absence of formal education, rehabilitation, or family support. Disrupted psychosocial development, extensive trauma

exposure, chronic and age-accelerated health conditions, and weakened family ties necessitate comprehensive, developmentally responsive, trauma-informed health and reentry supports (Bennett et al., 2025).

Over time, many of these individuals developed coping strategies, internal discipline, and a capacity to endure prolonged adversity, even as prisonization constrained opportunities for normative development. Upon release, this resilience is reflected in their determination to rebuild their lives, reestablish relationships, and adapt to unfamiliar social, technological, and community contexts, despite profound structural and developmental barriers. Recognizing this resilience, while also acknowledging the harms of prolonged incarceration, is essential to reframing reentry policy and practice away from deficit-based assumptions and toward a strengths-based and developmentally responsive approach.

Reentry success for individuals formerly serving EA- LWOP sentences must be defined beyond housing and employment to include social-emotional stability, health outcomes, and meaningful relationships. As resentencing expands, reentry infrastructure must grow in parallel, with Detroit positioned as a key site for place-based learning to inform state and national EA-LWOP reentry strategies. The Detroit Enhanced Reentry Project is one of a few studies (e.g., Abrams et al., 2023; Bennett et al., 2025; Canlione & Abrams, 2021; Sbeglia et al., 2024) that focus on the reentry needs of those formerly serving EA-LWOP sentences, with findings expected in early 2027 to inform policy and practice. Drawing on an in-depth qualitative study, the AIR team will examine first-person accounts of incarceration and reentry to further articulate how to design reentry policies and services for those formerly serving EA-LWOP sentences.

Bringing together the developmental and justice literature highlights a critical opportunity to support reentry for individuals formerly serving EA-LWOP sentences. Even as evidence continues to emerge, justice system professionals, reentry service providers, and policymakers can begin to enhance reentry services for this population, whose distinct needs call for developmentally responsive services and the use of trauma-informed frameworks to address the cumulative effects of incarceration beginning in youth. The extant literature also suggests that reentry policies and services should expand family-inclusive approaches; ensure access to comprehensive physical and behavioral health care; and support peer-based mentorship models to promote stability, autonomy, and social integration. Taken as a whole, these findings call for a deliberate shift away from deficit-based reentry models and toward strengths-based, developmentally responsive systems that recognize both the resilience of, and the enduring harms experienced by individuals formerly serving juvenile and emerging adult LWOP sentences.

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