

# WAYNE STATE UNIVERSITY

**news release**

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## **WSU study: Michigan citizens oppose state law on sentencing youths as adults**

A new Wayne State University study shows that Michigan citizens disapprove of many state policies and practices in the sentencing and confinement of juveniles – particularly those allowing youths to be sentenced to terms in adult prisons for natural life without the possibility of parole. Since 1988, more than 300 Michigan youths have been sentenced to Life Without Parole (LWOP).

The statewide poll conducted by Assistant Professors Sheryl Pimlott Kubiak and Terrence Allen and Associate Professor Anthony King, all of the School of Social Work, found that only 5 percent of Michigan residents supported juveniles serving life without parole in adult facilities. Moreover, Michigan citizens were strongly opposed to juveniles 16 and younger being housed in adult correctional facilities. Participants also believe that juveniles can be rehabilitated.

Each respondent was asked questions to assess their views on sentencing juveniles convicted of violent offenses. The more information each was given, the less likely the person was to support juvenile LWOP. For example, respondents were asked, “Michigan has a law that requires an adolescent to be sentenced to life without any possibility of parole for certain offenses. How strongly do you agree or disagree with this?” Forty-one percent said they agreed. However, when given clarifying information (that is, the sentence would be in an adult facility) and a range of options (for example, parole and combinations of juvenile and adult sentencing), only 5 percent believed that LWOP in an adult facility was an appropriate sentence.

Michigan citizens felt strongly that adolescents 16 and younger do not belong in adult correctional facilities. Nearly 80 percent of respondents believed that adolescents 14, 15 and 16 should not be imprisoned in adult prisons. Perhaps most important, more than 72 percent believed adolescents younger than 18 who commit violent offenses are strong candidates for rehabilitation.

To add context to these findings to further illuminate the views of Michigan citizens, WSU researchers asked them about adolescents in general. Wayne State found that only 26 percent of Michigan residents believe that adolescents between 12 and 17 years old are as responsible as adults. Furthermore, 83 percent supported considering adolescents' underdeveloped ability to control impulses and understand the consequences of their actions. Similarly, Michigan residents thought that abuse histories should be taken into account. Only 31 percent believed that adolescents abused as children should receive the same sentence as an adult for committing a violent offense.

"Because public sentiment is often used as a catalyst for legislation, it is important to have reliable and valid data when assessing public opinion," Kubiak said. She added that a full report of these findings will be available by October 30, 2005.

As a key component of an urban research university, the Wayne State University School of Social Work is among the nation's leaders in preparing students for professional practice. In national rankings, the school's bachelor's degree program is No. 1 and its master's degree program is in the top 25 percent.

Wayne State University is a premier institution of higher education offering more than 350 academic programs through 11 schools and colleges to more than 33,000 students.

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## **Public Attitudes in Michigan Regarding Sentencing Juveniles to Life without Parole**

During the spring and summer of 2005 independent, state-wide polling was conducted by Wayne State University Center for Urban Studies.<sup>1</sup>

The statewide poll found that only 5% of Michigan residents supported juveniles serving life without parole in adult facilities.<sup>2</sup>

The polling was also useful for discovering the beliefs of Michigan residents with regard to the treatment of juveniles who commit serious crimes. Only 26% of Michigan residents believe that adolescents between the age of 12 and 17 years old are as responsible as adults. More specifically, the majority of respondents did not believe that juveniles who commit violent offenses should receive the same punishment as an adult. Rather, they stated their strong belief that adolescents should be given a chance at parole even in homicide offenses.

Michigan citizens also felt strongly that adolescents 16 and younger do not belong in adult correctional facilities. Nearly 80% of respondents believed that adolescents 14, 15, & 16 should not be imprisoned in adult prisons, and over 72% believed adolescents under the age of 18 who commit violent offenses are strong candidates for rehabilitation, supporting second chances.

This polling is consistent with the results of several focus groups conducted in Grand Rapids and Southfield this year. The initial assessment demonstrated “a fairly high level of prevailing support for reform” of the current sentencing scheme for juveniles. When the four groups were provided basic facts on the waiver laws and the number of juveniles serving life without parole in Michigan, the support for change of the juvenile life without parole laws became overwhelming.

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<sup>1</sup> Researchers at the Wayne State School of Social Work (Kubiak, Allen & King) teamed up with survey experts at the Center for Urban Studies (CUS) to ask Michigan constituents questions on sentencing juveniles for serious crimes. Each year the Center for Urban Studies conducts a general population statewide survey of Michigan residents 18 and older using random digit dialing technique. The survey consisted of 750 completed interviews.

<sup>2</sup> Respondents included individuals from every county in Michigan in proportion to their size in the overall state population. Respondents were more likely to be female (36% male, 64% female), with a per capita income of \$38,113 and 79% were White/Caucasian, 16% African American, and 2% Hispanic. The mean age of respondents was 50 years old; 34% of the sample had a bachelors degree or higher.