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**Columbia Justice Lab Praises Today's Historic
Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court Ruling:
Life Without Parole Sentences for People Under 21 Unconstitutional**

NEW YORK, NY — Today the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court (SJC) ruled that life without parole sentences (mandatory or discretionary) imposed for crimes committed before a person's 21st birthday are unconstitutional because they violate Article 26 of the Massachusetts Declaration of Rights. The [SJC ruling](#) in Commonwealth vs. Mattis encompassed two cases of young people, one age 18 and one 19 at the time of the offenses, who were sentenced to life without parole (LWOP). The [Emerging Adult Justice Project \(EAJP\) at Columbia Justice Lab](#) praises this decision, which follows in the tradition of a series of landmark U.S. Supreme Court cases where the justices found it cruel and unusual to submit minors to automatic LWOP in part because of youths' ongoing development and potential to change, as well as previous Supreme Judicial Court cases.

"The Massachusetts court sought input from experts to better understand the developmental realities for people between the ages of 18 and 21," said EAJP Director Lael Chester. "The years of emerging adulthood are a time of intensive brain development. These young people are wired for impulsivity, not fully able to think through consequences, and heavily influenced by peers. Like people under age 18, emerging adults are highly likely to desist from crime as they mature. The court is granting emerging adults an opportunity to someday demonstrate to a parole board that they have matured and changed for the better. Science and justice are both clear that this is the minimum they deserve."

Massachusetts raised the age of adult criminal responsibility from 17 to 18 in 2013. Since then, 74% of people who were sentenced to life without parole for crimes committed as 17-year-olds have been granted parole. The vast majority have not been cited for parole violations, an indication that with maturity comes better adherence to legal and societal standards.

The Massachusetts ruling follows and takes a step further than the Michigan Supreme Court, which in 2022 held that mandatory LWOP sentences for crimes committed at age 18 violated the principle of proportionality and was cruel and unusual punishment under Michigan's state constitution. EAJP recently completed a [national study of "hybrid" laws](#) that allow for different handling of emerging adults by legal systems based on their developmental stage.

“Development is a continuum, not a threshold,” said the study’s lead author and EAJP Associate Director, Selen Siringil Perker. “As our research found, many states around the country have come up with innovative solutions to extend some of the rehabilitative opportunities of their juvenile systems to emerging adults. The Massachusetts ruling follows this national trend of legal systems acknowledging that maturation continues into the twenties.”

“Child welfare systems around the country are likewise extending services and support to people into their early twenties. Young people live with their parents longer than previous generations and, for a host of reasons, are reaching adult milestones associated with desistance, such as meaningful employment and committed relationships, later in life. Recognizing that maturation continues throughout emerging adulthood will lead to better outcomes for young people and public safety. The Massachusetts SJC has made a wise decision, supported by facts. Other states should follow this example,” Chester said.

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[The Justice Lab at Columbia University](#) seeks to foundationally reconceive justice policy through actionable research, community-centered policy development, and the sustained engagement of diverse constituencies. We envision a community-centered future for justice in which healing and resiliency, rather than punishment and surveillance, are used to solve social problems often rooted in racial and economic inequity. Follow us on Twitter [@CUJusticeLab](#)