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**NEW STUDY SHINES LIGHT ON EXTREME SENTENCES FOR FELONY MURDER  
CONVICTIONS**

*Thousands of Americans will be behind bars for life due to deaths they did not intentionally  
cause*

**WASHINGTON, D.C.** – Today, the Sentencing Project and Fair and Just Prosecution released an extensive analysis of the United States’ fundamentally flawed felony murder laws – a legal landscape that is at odds with the rest of the world. “Felony murder” occurs when a person participates in a felony, such as a robbery, that results in someone’s death. Felony murder laws compel harsh decades-long – or even life – sentences even when the individual charged did not directly cause or intend the loss of life. Today’s [report](#), *Felony Murder: An On-Ramp for Extreme Sentencing*, explains that thousands of Americans will remain behind bars their entire lives, even when they do not pose a public safety risk, based on these extreme sentencing provisions.

“The penalties for felony murder are nothing short of egregious. The criminal legal system loses legitimacy when someone can be sentenced to life without parole for simply being in the same room as a person who took a life,” **said Nazgol Ghandnoosh, Ph.D., Senior Research Analyst at the Sentencing Project and lead author of the report.** “There is no possible justification for this kind of extreme punishment.”

The report recounts the personal stories of people serving life sentences for felony murder. Emmanuel Mendoza, for example, was 19 when he took part in a robbery that ended in his accomplice fatally shooting the victim. Although Mendoza did not have a weapon and the killing had not been planned, he was convicted of felony murder with special circumstances and automatically sentenced to life without parole.

“For far too long, felony murder laws have been used to lock people up and throw away the key, disproportionately affecting young people and women of color. These extreme sentences come at tremendous human and financial costs and are at odds with practices in many other parts of the world. Yet they continue to be perpetuated in our country, with no evidence that they deter crime or promote public safety,” **said Miriam Krinsky, Executive Director at Fair and Just**

**Prosecution.** “We need policymakers at every level of government to act now and address these concerning laws, and elected prosecutors can lead reform efforts by embracing policies that ameliorate many of the injustices of felony murder laws.”

Despite extreme concerns with felony murder laws, 40 states, the District of Columbia, and the federal system allow life without parole (LWOP) sentences for felony murder convictions – and many jurisdictions mandate such sentences. These laws have particularly adverse impacts on young people of color and women.

The report also explains that extreme sentences for felony murder do little to protect public safety. An abundance of research shows that people age out of crime. And many of the people serving time for felony murder have already been imprisoned for decades.

Other key findings include:

- Approximately half of California's LWOP population was convicted of felony murder, based on a sample of 2,300 individuals who comprised half of the state's LWOP population.
- In 2019, 1,166 Pennsylvanians were serving LWOP for felony murder—accounting for nearly one-quarter of the state's LWOP population.
- In Cook County, Illinois, eight out of 10 people sentenced under the felony murder rule between 2010 and 2020 were Black.
- LWOP is prohibited for felony murder convictions in 155 of the 193 United Nations member states. Most countries that do impose LWOP sentences do so only sparingly. The United States is a glaring exception.

The full report is available [here](#).

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*The Sentencing Project promotes effective and humane responses to crime that minimize imprisonment and criminalization of youth and adults by promoting racial, ethnic, economic, and gender justice.*

*Fair and Just Prosecution is a national network of elected prosecutors working towards common-sense, compassionate criminal justice reforms. To learn more about FJP's work, visit the [FJP website](#) and follow FJP on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [LinkedIn](#).*