

**OP ED | Opinion** *This piece expresses the views of its author(s), separate from those of this publication.*

# Arizona must reform juvenile life sentences | Opinion

*Passing Senate Bill 1548 would give children convicted of homicide a chance to avoid life without parole, recognizing their character can change.*

**José B. Ashford** For The Republic

Feb. 16, 2026 | Updated Feb. 17, 2026, 9:10 a.m. MT

Arizona remains among a [shrinking number of states](#) that allow life without parole for children convicted of homicide. These cases involve devastating harm, permanent loss and enduring grief for victims' families. Nothing in the debate over juvenile life without parole (JLWOP) minimizes that harm. The question is whether Arizona's sentencing practices accurately distinguish between the severity of the offense and the culpability of the child who committed it.

Sentencing is not meant to measure harm alone. It must also assess the offender's culpability. For children, that distinction is critical. Adolescents are more impulsive, more susceptible to peer influence and less capable of anticipating long-term consequences. Their character is not yet fixed. These are well-established findings the U.S. Supreme Court has repeatedly recognized as factors relevant for sentencing juvenile homicide offenders.

Yet in practice, Arizona sentencing too often allows the brutality of an offense to substitute for a meaningful evaluation of a child's developmental status and moral culpability. Judicial labels, such as "heinous," describe the harm suffered by victims, but they do not explain whether the punishment is proportionate to a child's culpability or future risk. When offense severity becomes a stand-in for culpability or risk, a retributive instinct can eclipse individualized sentencing.

## Arizona permanently denies youthful offenders a chance to change

The Supreme Court contends in [Miller v. Alabama](#) that juvenile life without parole should be rare. In [Jones v. Mississippi](#), the Court held that judges may impose this sentence based on discretionary moral judgment, without requiring a finding of permanent incorrigibility. The problem is not that this discretion is unlawful. It is that Arizona permits the harshest possible sentence for a child without requiring judges to explain how youth-related mitigation was weighed or why parole eligibility was rejected.

**Need a news break?** Check out the all new PLAY hub with puzzles, games and more!

Developmental science shows that many youths who commit violent crimes do not remain violent as adults. Arizona's sentencing framework insufficiently reflects that reality by permanently foreclosing the possibility for maturity and change at sentencing.

## Bill would give jailed youths a chance at parole review

The most direct solution is [Senate Bill 1548](#), which would eliminate JLWOP and allow parole review after 25 years. Parole review does not guarantee release or erase accountability. It provides a second look based on demonstrated maturity, responsibility, and current risk rather than a child's worst act. States that have adopted this approach have not seen demonstrated threats to public safety. Still, concerns for victims deserve careful consideration.

Victims' advocates reasonably worry that parole review undermines finality or forces families to relive their loss. But parole review does not reopen guilt or minimize harm. Finality in serious cases is already limited by appeals, resentencing, and executive clemency. A delayed parole review instead gives victims, if they choose, an opportunity to assess who the offender has become. Some may find continued incarceration necessary; others may not as their needs changed. Both victims' judgments deserve respect.

Federal judges must provide detailed explanations when sentencing nonviolent offenders. Yet in Arizona, a judge may sentence a child to die in prison without providing an explanation for the sentence imposed. Justice should be firm and respect victims, but also accurate and fair in considering questions of culpability and risk.

If Arizona declines to abolish JLWOP, it should at least require sentencing accountability. Judges should be required to explain why the opportunity for consideration for parole was denied. This would not eliminate discretion or contradict Jones. It would ensure that discretion is exercised transparently and rationally, without imposing any substantive sentencing outcome.

Justice must respect victims while remaining accurate in assessing culpability and risk. Whether by ending juvenile life without parole or by requiring a statement of reasons explaining the sentence selected, Arizona can better align punishment with individualized justice currently required by law.

*José B. Ashford is professor emeritus of social work and law and behavioral science at Arizona State University and former director of ASU's Office of Offender Diversion and Sentencing Solutions.*

*(This column has been updated with additional information.)*