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NEW STUDY SHINES LIGHT ON CALIFORNIA'S EXTREME SENTENCES FOR FELONY MURDER CONVICTIONS

Hundreds of Californians are trapped 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 California's fundamentally flawed felony murder laws. Felony murder occurs when a person participates in a felony, such as a robbery, that results in someone's death. The [report](#), *Felony Murder: An On-Ramp for Extreme Sentencing*, explains that hundreds of Californians are locked behind bars their entire lives due to deaths that they did not directly cause or intend to cause.

The report finds that:

- Approximately half of California's life without parole (LWOP) population was convicted of felony murder.
- The California Coalition for Women Prisoners reports that the majority of their members convicted of felony murder were accomplices navigating intimate partner violence at the time of the offense and were criminalized for acts of self-preservation.
- In California, prosecutors have been more likely to bring murder charges under the "special circumstances" law—which includes felony murder and imposes a mandatory minimum sentence of LWOP—against people of color or in cases involving white victims.

"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.**

The report recounts the personal stories of people serving life sentences for felony murder, including Emmanuel Mendoza, who was 19 when he took part in a robbery that ended in his accomplice fatally killing 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.

In prison, Mendoza has transformed. He has earned a GED and associate degree, embraced his faith, and has been an active father to his three children.

“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 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 our [website](#) and follow us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [LinkedIn](#).