



Children behind bars for life – the human cost of British justice

Description

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In the background is an image of a child in prison. The silhouette of a child facing left and they have the UK state traps vulnerable children in a brutal cycle of lifetime incarceration, and exposes a system that rejects the idea of rehabilitation entirely. This disgusting model our nation follows separates us from the rest of [Western Europe](#), where sticking kids in cages for life is banned.

At a London panel hosted by the campaign group [Joint Enterprise Not Guilty by Association](#) (JENGbA) on Friday 19 June 2026 saw mothers, lawyers and former child lifers tell their stories. And it ripped my heart out. JENGbA campaigns tirelessly to end child life sentences and their testimonies exposed a racist, ableist nightmare under a legal dragnet. And it aggressively targets some of our most vulnerable youth.

The law is racist and ableist

The UK justice system is a joke. We punish children way more severely than nearly [any other nation](#) in Western Europe. The state deals out disgustingly long and harsh punishments for children due to our low age of criminal responsibility. That age is just [ten years old](#)

Last night at the [@HouseofCommons](#) JENGbA launched [#Abolish](#) Child Life Sentences to a packed room. Hosted by [@KimJohnsonMP](#) with great speakers. The blanket on the wall was a sombre reminder how children DIE in diabolical circumstances in [#prison](#) [@Channel4News](#) [@BBCNews](#) [pic.twitter.com/tEXXPMFqrt](#)

JENGbA (@JENGbA) [March 25, 2026](#)

Imagine being ten. I can't even remember being that old. You're not even very self aware. Caught up in that tender age before hormones kick in properly, kids that age don't have a fully developed brain. They're susceptible to lies, peer pressure and getting things wrong. It's that age when you're starting to find your feet in the world, but you're no way near knowing who you fully are. And the UK state thinks people at the age of ten can make fully informed decisions like an adult? Absolutely not.

But under joint enterprise, that state can convict a child for murder. One that they didn't even commit. This legal dragnet disproportionately affects neurodivergent children. As someone with ADHD myself, this really hits home. Autistic and ADHD kids struggle to process fast-moving social cues. Sometimes they cannot anticipate the violent actions of their peers. One panellist even told of a case of a child-lifer who was convicted, despite being 20 meters away from the actual murder.

This dragnet also relies on deeply racist mechanisms, sweeping up marginalised communities in a disproportionate manner. Academic research reveals that Black people are up to a vile 16 times more likely to be targeted than white people. This system is deeply racist, stereotyping Black youths as criminals and systematically weakening Black communities. They live in constant fear of the state coming for them.

Due to wild backlogs in Child & Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) kids are waiting between two and five years for assessments. So why is the state weaponising supported kids as bad? They're sending Black and neurodivergent youths straight into prison. For life.

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We sacrifice thousands for a single case

People will always bring up the disgusting case of James Bulger to try to reinforce the state narrative. The horrific murder in 1993 was carried out by two ten-year-olds and was weaponised to challenge legal reform. But this once in a lifetime, standalone case remains the shield the state uses to justify putting hundreds of kids in prison for life.

But the JENGbA panel exposes the vile logic of this defence. The state is weaponising a case from 30 years ago to justify systematically failing thousands of other children.

Joint enterprise convictions in England and Wales have soared since 1980s, report finds <https://t.co/ucic3NoQy6>

JENGbA (@JENGbA) [June 11, 2026](#)

We are allowing an outdated dragnet to ruin countless lives. All because the justice system refuses to put the time in to distinguish real killers from undiagnosed and terrified youths who just need help. Around 80% of kids in the youth justice system are neurodivergent or have educational needs. So why is the state trading their lives, thousands of them, to maintain a wildly outdated tough-on-crime illusion?

Instead, when these kids are on trial, the court suppresses them. A panel member stated judges routinely block expert advice about a child's learning difficulties from juries. These kids are put in [glass boxes](#) isolated from their legal teams. The courts routinely fail to make reasonable adjustments for the accused. They refuse to alter their communication methods, meaning kids don't understand what is going on. Kids are charged and sent to underfunded facilities miles away from home. This severs any kind of support system these lost children have. Meanwhile, Germany sees minors of being [incapable of grasping criminal intent](#) until the age of 17 due to their brains being undeveloped.

However, rehabilitation seems to be a dirty word in the UK Youth court system.

A lifetime of trauma and surveillance

And even after these kids finally get out, the trauma doesn't stop there. After a lifetime inside, they're emotionally stunted and not equipped for a life outside.

One of the previous child-lifers who is Black, told of how he flinches when he sees the outline of a white person at the door. He lives in a constant state of terror that he'll go back behind bars for any small mistake. Or if someone ever lies about him to the police. Just one case of mistaken identity and he will lose his freedom.

These lifers told us of the seven hour interrogation they had to go through to get out of prison. They can bring up any minor infractions, even those committed when they were really young. These guys were now in their thirties when going through this process.

Today, some of those survivors actively go into schools. They speak to kids about their experiences, hoping none of them they preach to have to go through what they did.

Whilst our neighbours such as [Norway ban putting kids in cages](#) for life, we don't seem to actually care. In the UK it seems the state thinks it's better to lock up these lost children. Rather than actually addressing the root causes of these issues, we stick them in cages. The state refuses to give these kids the support they so desperately need.

It is time we dismantled the joint enterprise before the state destroys another generation of Black and neurodivergent youth.

Featured images via the Canary

By [Antifabot](#)

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