



To: Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee

From: Lara Gingerich, national legislative coordinator for the National Organization of Victims of Juvenile Murderers (NOVJM)

Bill: Senate Bill 494

Position: Informational Only

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Dear Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee,

We are the National Organization of Victims of Juvenile Murderers (NOVJM).<sup>1</sup> We represent about 370 victims around the country who have lost loved ones to juvenile killers. We are grateful for this opportunity to submit testimony regarding Senate Bill 494.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.teenkillers.org/>

We understand that the criminal justice system is not perfect and needs reform. We oppose over-sentencing offenders to prison terms that are grossly disproportionate when compared to their crimes. And we recognize that most juvenile offenders have the capacity to reform. However, some juvenile crimes may warrant life without parole (LWOP).

Juvenile offender advocates often decline to acknowledge the brutal reality of some crimes committed by juveniles. They portray all juvenile crimes as simply being “mistakes” made due to impaired judgment. They further minimize juvenile offenders’ culpability by referring to them as “children” and by using other hurtful tactics.<sup>2</sup> But contrary to these advocates’ claims, some juveniles commit acts of wanton cruelty with full knowledge of the results of their actions and with the intention to bring about those results. We will list just two of many examples to illustrate the point.

- When Priscilla Gustafson and her two children returned to their home they were confronted by Daniel Laplante. Laplante, 17, had broken into their home while they were away. Laplante first tied Priscilla to the bed and raped her. He then shot the pregnant nursery school teacher twice in the head. Next, he drowned Priscilla’s two children, five-year-old William and seven-year-old Abigail in bathtubs.<sup>3</sup>
- Johnny Freeman enticed five-year-old Shavanna McCann with candy and lured her to a vacant apartment on the 14th floor of a housing project. Once in the apartment, Freeman, who was three months away from his 18th birthday, raped little Shavanna. Freeman then

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<sup>2</sup> Most juveniles who get LWOP were 16 or 17 when they committed the offenses. They were not “children.” See <http://www.teenkillers.org/index.php/juvenile-lifers/teen-killers-are-not-children/> Juvenile offender advocates also use pictures of children as young as six in their publications. See <http://www.teenkillers.org/index.php/juvenile-lifers/the-propaganda-campaign/> This is extremely insensitive and offensive to victims.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.teenkillers.org/index.php/juvenile-lifers/offenders-cases-state/massachusetts-offenders/daniel-laplante/>

tried to kill Shavanna by throwing her out the 14th story window. But Shavanna was brave and held onto the window's ledge with her fingertips. The terrified child screamed for her mother. But she didn't have a chance. She was stuck between a 14 story drop and a rapist who wanted to murder her. Freeman pried her fingers off the window ledge. This time Shavanna was not able to hold on to anything. The young child plunged 14 stories to her death on the hard ground below.<sup>4</sup>

Most victims who lose loved in such horrific ways oppose the release of the killers. To fight release, they speak up at hearings to be a voice for their dead family members who cannot speak for themselves. This forces them to relive the murders. Conditions suffered as a result of the murders, such as PTSD, depression, and anxiety, flare up and they suffer flashbacks, nightmares, and other symptoms. Traumatizing criminal justice hearings should be kept to an absolute minimum.

Thank you for giving us this opportunity to be heard. We ask that lawmakers consider victims when making decisions that will impact us.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.teenkillers.org/index.php/memorials/illinois-victims/shavanna-mccann/>