



Can the U.S. Constitution or the Inter-American Human Rights Charter system be used to challenge life-without-parole (LWOP) sentences in the United States—including for non-murder offenses and even for murder?

Below is a legal opinion and a practical, litigation-ready roadmap. It distinguishes **what the law clearly is today** from **the strongest paths to change**. It integrates U.S. Eighth-Amendment doctrine with Inter-American human-rights standards you can deploy for courts, clemency boards, legislatures, and international petitions.

Executive summary

- **U.S. federal baseline.** As of now, the U.S. Supreme Court **permits** LWOP for adults, including for non-homicide (e.g., *Harmelin v. Michigan* upheld mandatory LWOP for a first-time adult drug offense), though traditional, difficult **as-applied proportionality** challenges remain available. For youth, *Graham* categorically bars LWOP for **non-homicide**; *Miller* bars **mandatory** LWOP for homicide; *Montgomery* makes *Miller* retroactive; *Jones* holds no separate finding of “permanent incorrigibility” is constitutionally required so long as the sentencer had discretion and considered youth.
- **Inter-American baseline.** The United States **has not ratified** the American Convention on Human Rights (ACHR) and does **not** accept the Inter-American Court’s contentious jurisdiction; however, as an OAS (Organisation of American States) member, it is supervised by the **Inter-American Commission** under the **American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man**, which prohibits “cruel, infamous or unusual punishment.” The Commission has accepted petitions challenging U.S. LWOP—especially for juveniles—and relies on the

ACHR as persuasive authority. The Inter-American Court has **held juvenile life sentences violate the ACHR** and emphasized rehabilitation and a **“right to hope.”** These norms are not binding on U.S. courts, but they are **credible, persuasive authorities** for constitutional interpretation, clemency, and legislative reform.

- **Bottom line for challenges.**

1. **Juveniles:** LWOP for non-homicide is categorically barred; homicide LWOP requires individualized sentencings that genuinely weigh youth; many state constitutions and statutes now go further (and the Commission/IACtHR go further still).
2. **Adults, non-homicide:** Not categorically barred under current U.S. law, but **as-applied** Eighth-Amendment claims remain viable using *Solem v. Helm* factors, with robust record-building and comparative evidence; embed Inter-American “right-to-hope” arguments to urge at least **periodic parole-eligibility review.**
3. **Adults, homicide:** U.S. law permits LWOP, but you can press **procedural Eighth Amendment** and **as-applied proportionality** theories and ask courts (or legislatures) to constitutionally require a **meaningful opportunity for release** after a set term (e.g., 20–25 years), drawing on *Graham’s* language and Inter-American/ECHR “hope” jurisprudence.

I. U.S. constitutional law: what it forecloses, what it leaves open

A. The categorical and as-applied tracks

1. Categorical rules (Eighth Amendment)

The Court sets bright lines when a punishment is **“unusual”** in light of “evolving standards of decency” (*Trop v. Dulles*). Categorical rules now include:

- **No LWOP for juveniles** who commit **non-homicide** offenses (*Graham*).
- **No mandatory LWOP** for juveniles convicted of homicide (*Miller*), retroactive (*Montgomery*).

- **No requirement** that the sentencer find “permanent incorrigibility” before imposing juvenile LWOP; discretion plus consideration of youth suffices (*Jones*). There is **no categorical U.S. ban** on **adult** LWOP—whether for homicide or non-homicide. *Harmelin* upheld mandatory LWOP for adult drug possession; *Ewing* and *Lockyer v. Andrade* (three-strikes) reinforce how **narrow** proportionality review is for adult noncapital sentences.

2. **As-applied proportionality (Solem test)**

Solem v. Helm struck a LWOP sentence for a seventh nonviolent felony using a three-part test (gravity of offense vs. harshness of penalty; intra- and inter-jurisdictional comparisons). Although narrowed by later cases, **as-applied proportionality remains available**—especially for outlier non-homicide LWOPs, felony-murder accomplices with attenuated culpability, and cases with unusually strong mitigation. Build the record meticulously.

3. **B. The most persuasive U.S. arguments against LWOP today**

1. **Extend *Graham*’s “meaningful opportunity for release”**

Graham requires a “**meaningful opportunity to obtain release based on demonstrated maturity and rehabilitation**” for juvenile non-homicide. Argue that the **same constitutional minimum** should apply across the board (or at least to non-homicide adults and felony-murder accomplices) because the Eighth Amendment is animated by human dignity and proportionality, not age alone. Courts have not adopted this sweeping rule yet, but it is textually and normatively grounded in *Trop*’s evolving-standards doctrine and *Graham*’s rehabilitation rationale.

2. **As-applied disproportionality for non-homicide adults**

Use *Solem* aggressively: (i) gravity vs. LWOP’s severity; (ii) intrastate comparisons (e.g., more serious crimes receive less severe punishment); (iii) interstate comparisons (demonstrate **national consensus drifting away** from extreme terms and the rarity of LWOP for similar conduct). Present empirical evidence on aging-out of crime and lack of marginal deterrence of LWOP over long-term sentences. (*Harmelin*/three-strikes cases make the bar high, but *Solem*-style showings still succeed occasionally.)

3. **Procedural Eighth Amendment**

Even if LWOP is substantively permitted, argue that due to the Eighth Amendment’s dignity principle and *Graham*’s logic, states must provide **periodic, non-illusory review** keyed to rehabilitation—i.e., parole eligibility or sentence-modification review within a fixed horizon (e.g., 20–25 years), with counsel and reasons, not a paper exercise. Use state constitutional provisions (many are broader than the federal Eighth Amendment) as parallel grounds.

4. **Due Process (Fourteenth Amendment)**

Where a state creates parole or resentencing avenues, **procedural due process** requires minimally fair procedures in granting/denying release (notice, opportunity to be heard, reasoned decisions). While there is no freestanding federal right to parole, **state-created liberty interests** trigger due process protections that can be litigated. Cite modern due-process annotations on parole/probation.

II. The Inter-American system: leverage for U.S. litigation, clemency, and reform

A. Applicability to the United States

- The U.S. **signed but never ratified** the ACHR and **does not** accept the Inter-American Court’s contentious jurisdiction. Nevertheless, as an OAS member it is supervised by the **Inter-American Commission** under the **American Declaration**, whose Article XXVI bars “cruel, infamous or unusual punishment.” The Commission treats the Declaration as binding; the U.S. historically disputes that, but it **participates** in cases and responds on the merits—so this material carries recognized weight.

B. Substantive standards you can invoke

1. **Human dignity, rehabilitation, and the “right to hope.”**

The **ACHR Article 5** guarantees humane treatment; Inter-American jurisprudence repeatedly links punishment to **resocialization/rehabilitation**, especially for youth. The Inter-American Court’s **Mendoza v. Argentina** (2013) held that **life imprisonment for crimes committed as children violates the ACHR**, emphasizing special protection of minors and condemning

punishments that extinguish prospects of release—an articulation of a regional “**right to hope.**”

2. **Commission action against U.S. JLWOP.**

The Commission has **admitted** and examined U.S. petitions challenging **juvenile LWOP**, grounding analysis in the American Declaration (and drawing on ACHR/CRC norms). These proceedings offer **authoritative findings** and recommendations you can present to domestic actors.

3. **American Declaration text that can be quoted in U.S. filings.**

Article XXVI: every accused person has the right “not to receive **cruel, infamous or unusual punishment.**” **Article XXV** guarantees protection from arbitrary detention and humane treatment in custody. These map cleanly onto U.S. Eighth-Amendment values and support a **minimal constitutional floor of parole eligibility or review** in LWOP cases.

Use-case: In sentencing memoranda, appellate briefs, or clemency petitions, couple *Trop/Graham* with **Article XXVI** and *Mendoza*: argue the Eighth Amendment should be construed consistent with the Inter-American consensus rejecting irreducible life sentences—**at least** to require a “**meaningful opportunity for release**” after a finite term.

III. Proof and policy record to build

- **Domestic trend evidence (consensus):** Document state reforms limiting LWOP—especially **near-abolition of JLWOP** (roughly **29 jurisdictions, incl. D.C., have ended JLWOP** by statute or practice) and reductions in adult LWOP’s functional scope. This supports an *evolving standards* argument and underscores that permanent warehousing is not necessary for safety.
- **Rarity & outlier status:** Show how **few** non-homicide cases actually receive LWOP, highlighting your jurisdiction’s outlier position and intra-state disproportionalities (e.g., more serious crimes often draw parole-eligible terms).
- **Rehabilitation & aging-out:** Provide criminological evidence that public-safety returns of LWOP over long terms are minimal, while costs and human harms are substantial; use data on **aging-out** and

the Sentencing Project’s analyses of lifer populations and parole backlogs to argue for **review mechanisms**.

- **Comparative human-rights authority:** While you need not rely on Europe, courts and clemency bodies find “**right to hope**” reasoning from life-sentence jurisprudence persuasive. The Inter-American materials already synthesize these principles; cite them primarily.

IV. Litigation templates

A. Juvenile non-homicide LWOP (or its de facto equivalents)

- **Relief:** Vacate LWOP; resentence to a term with **meaningful parole eligibility** no later than a set horizon (20–25 years), with a real opportunity to demonstrate maturity and rehabilitation.
- **Authorities:** *Graham* (categorical bar); American Declaration Art. XXVI; IACtHR *Mendoza* (persuasive); Commission decisions admitting JLWOP cases against the U.S.

B. Juvenile homicide LWOP

- **Relief:** New sentencing consistent with *Miller/Montgomery*; if discretionary LWOP is re-imposed, require **heightened findings** tied to youth-related mitigation and a **periodic review mechanism**; argue state-constitutional grounds to require parole eligibility by years-served.
- **Authorities:** *Miller, Montgomery, Jones* (limits), plus Article XXVI and *Mendoza* to urge a review requirement.

C. Adult non-homicide LWOP (hardest category)

- **Theory 1 (as-applied disproportionality):** *Solem* factors; outlier proof; intra-/inter-jurisdiction comparisons; mitigation (mental health, trauma, role).
- **Theory 2 (procedural Eighth Amendment):** Even if LWOP is permissible, the Constitution **requires a meaningful opportunity for release** after a finite term; require statutory or judicially created **parole eligibility** or **periodic sentence-review** with reasons.
- **Inter-American overlay:** Article XXVI plus *Mendoza*—argue that permanent exclusion without review is incompatible with human

dignity recognized across the Americas; urge courts to **harmonize** Eighth-Amendment doctrine with this regional consensus.

- **Fallback:** Seek **executive clemency** guided by the same principles; attach Commission materials.
- **D. Adult homicide LWOP**
- **Approach:** As-applied proportionality (particularly where culpability is attenuated—e.g., felony-murder non-killer, youthful adult, severe trauma/brain injury), plus **procedural Eighth Amendment** seeking periodic review; state-constitutional arguments may be decisive.

V. Inter-American petition strategy (parallel track)

1. **Exhaustion or exceptions.** After exhausting domestic remedies (or invoking exceptions for undue delay), file with the **Inter-American Commission** alleging violations of the American Declaration—**Articles I, XXV, XXVI**, and, for juveniles, **Article VII** (special protection). Ask for findings that **irreducible LWOP** violates the Declaration and for recommendations requiring **parole-eligibility review** at a fixed interval (e.g., 20–25 years) with due-process safeguards.
2. **Leverage.** While Commission merits reports are not self-executing domestically, they carry **authoritative international weight**; they bolster constitutional interpretation, legislative reform, and clemency campaigns. Use *Mendoza* and Advisory Opinion **OC-17/02** (children’s rights, reflecting CRC art. 37’s ban on juvenile LWOP) to reinforce that **indefinite exclusion without realistic prospect of release** is incompatible with contemporary Inter-American standards.

VI. Draft remedial language (model)

Requested Relief. The Court should hold that the Eighth Amendment, informed by the American Declaration’s prohibition on “cruel, infamous or unusual punishment” and persuasive Inter-American authority, forbids the continued enforcement of an **irreducible life sentence** that **categorically** forecloses any *meaningful opportunity to obtain release based on demonstrated maturity and rehabilitation*. At minimum, the Court should order that Mr. ___ be made **eligible for parole** (or sentence review) no later

than the completion of **25 years** of imprisonment, with **procedurally adequate** consideration of rehabilitation, risk, and mitigating circumstances, and a **reasoned decision** subject to judicial review.

Grounding: *Trop* (evolving standards); *Graham* (meaningful opportunity); *Solem* (as-applied proportionality); American Declaration Art. XXVI; ACHR Art. 5; IACtHR *Mendoza*.

VII. Anticipating the State's answers—and the counters

- **“Harmelin controls adult non-homicide.”**
Counter: *Harmelin* is a fractured 1991 decision; subsequent doctrine deepened the dignity/proportionality analysis (*Graham/Miller*). Even if categorical relief is unavailable, **as-applied** relief remains (*Solem*), and a **procedural Eighth-Amendment** requirement of **periodic review** is fully consistent with *Graham*'s reasoning and *Trop*'s evolving standards.
- **“Jones says no special finding is required for JLWOP.”**
Counter: Correct—but *Jones* does **not** authorize **illusory** review or perfunctory consideration of youth. Use state constitutions and the Inter-American materials to argue for **real** mitigation weighting and **review mechanisms**.
- **“Inter-American decisions are not binding.”**
Counter: True on direct enforceability in U.S. courts, but **U.S. courts routinely consult international norms** when interpreting open-textured constitutional provisions (Eighth Amendment). The American Declaration formally governs the U.S. within the OAS, and the Commission's jurisprudence—together with the Court's *Mendoza*—reflects a **regional consensus** that indefinite, non-reviewable life terms violate human dignity, particularly for youth. Use this to advance constitutional avoidance, legislative reform, and clemency.

VIII. Practical next steps (case-building)

1. **Record:** Compile a comparative **sentencing survey** (intra- and inter-state), show rarity of LWOP for similar conduct, and document statutory reforms (esp. JLWOP repeals) to demonstrate an **evolving national consensus**.

2. **Mitigation & rehabilitation:** Expert reports (neuro, trauma, maturation), programming, disciplinary record, re-entry plans; show **actual rehabilitation**.
3. **Parole process evidence:** Where parole exists, prove **systemic delay/denial** (lack of counsel, perfunctory denials, extreme setoffs) to support a “**meaningful opportunity**” remedy.
4. **International appendix:** Attach **Article XXVI** text, **ACHR Article 5** text, the **Mendoza** judgment excerpts, and any pertinent Commission documents/admissibility decisions in U.S. JLWOP matters.

Concluding position

- **Yes—there is real law to invoke.** On U.S. constitutional grounds, **juvenile** LWOP is already sharply curtailed; **adult** LWOP remains permitted, but **as-applied proportionality** and **procedural Eighth-Amendment** theories (requiring **meaningful parole-eligibility review**) are credible and increasingly supported by national trends. *Solem*, *Trop*, and *Graham* provide the frame; *Harmelin/Ewing/Andrade* set the limits you must overcome.
- **Inter-American law materially strengthens the argument.** Even if not binding domestically, the **American Declaration** and Inter-American jurisprudence—especially *Mendoza*’s rejection of juvenile life sentences—supply strong, respected authority that **irreducible** life terms **violate human dignity** because they extinguish the “**right to hope.**” Use that to press for a **constitutional floor of periodic, meaningful review**—for juveniles as a given, and for adults as the next, principled step.

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03/09/2025

List of Authorities

U.S. Constitutional Cases

- *Trop v. Dulles*, 356 U.S. 86 (1958)
- *Harmelin v. Michigan*, 501 U.S. 957 (1991)
- *Ewing v. California*, 538 U.S. 11 (2003)
- *Lockyer v. Andrade*, 538 U.S. 63 (2003)
- *Solem v. Helm*, 463 U.S. 277 (1983)
- *Graham v. Florida*, 560 U.S. 48 (2010)
- *Miller v. Alabama*, 567 U.S. 460 (2012)
- *Montgomery v. Louisiana*, 577 U.S. 190 (2016)
- *Jones v. Mississippi*, 593 U.S. ____ (2021)

U.S. Constitutional Provisions

- U.S. Const. amend. VIII (Cruel and Unusual Punishments Clause)
- U.S. Const. amend. XIV (Due Process Clause)

Inter-American & International Authorities

- American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man, art. XXV, XXVI
- American Convention on Human Rights, art. 5
- Inter-American Court of Human Rights, *Mendoza v. Argentina* (Judgment of 14 May 2013)
- Inter-American Court of Human Rights, Advisory Opinion OC-17/02 (Children's Rights under the Inter-American System)
- U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child, art. 37 (persuasive context)

Additional Comparative and Policy Sources

- Inter-American Commission on Human Rights reports on U.S. juvenile LWOP
- The Sentencing Project, reports on lifer populations and parole practices
- Criminological evidence on rehabilitation and aging-out of crime