

# JSRI

JESUIT SOCIAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE  
LOYOLA UNIVERSITY NEW ORLEANS

ESTABLISHED 2007

Follow us on social media!



**2026 Guest Editor: Professor Christian Bolden, Ph.D.**

**JustSouth Editor: Scotty Wolfe, B.S.**

## Upcoming Events

### With JSRI:

#### **JustSouth Monthly Podcast.**

Listen to [last month's podcast episode](#) with William Snowden about his March *JustSouth* article, [Louisiana's Unfinished Business after Ramos](#), hosted by Loyola junior, Si Starks.

### In the Community:

#### **The People's Veto: A Teach-In.**

Orleans Parish voters chose Calvin Duncan for Clerk of Court, but Louisiana legislators voted to dissolve the Clerk of Criminal Court position. From the Supreme Court to the Louisiana Legislature, our voting rights are under attack. The people hold the power in a Democracy; join the Calvin For Clerk campaign to learn how to use it. **Monday, May 4th at 5 P.M. at The Broadside. [See the flyer here.](#)**

**Unión Migrante Immigration Court Watch.** Unión Migrante is a democratic organization of immigrants and their supporters. They are dedicated to fighting

## Considering Developmental Age in Justice Responses to Emerging Adults

By Victoria Rivera Laugalis, Ph.D.

In the United States, the most common age to receive a life without the possibility of parole sentence is 23 years old, meaning we frequently decide to imprison people for their entire adult lives before their brain is fully developed (Nellis & Monazzam, 2023). About 40% of individuals serving life without parole in the United States were 25 years old or younger when the sentence was imposed, and 66% of these incarcerated people sentenced to life at a young age are Black. **In Louisiana, 36% of people serving life without parole were sentenced at or before the age of 25.** The disproportionate life sentencing of youth in the United States stresses a need to assess the humaneness of this justice response, especially in states where this is highest.

**Should a 23-year-old convicted of murder be sentenced to live the rest of their life in prison? Do they have no chance of rehabilitating and becoming a prosocial member of society? What about a 21-year-old? An 18-year-old?**

The Supreme Court considered developmental age in their decision to ban mandatory life without parole sentences for juveniles in 2012 in *Miller v. Alabama*, citing adolescent immaturity, impulsivity, and capacity to change. Since children are developmentally different from adults, *Miller* proposed juveniles' lessened culpability should be considered in life sentencing. Neuroscience, however, shows that the brain continues to develop past age 18, and the developmental plasticity that facilitates learning and change is still present even during emerging adulthood (Steinberg, 2012). **Illinois, Massachusetts, Michigan, and Washington recognized this and enacted legislation that bans or reduces the most punitive sentences and provides more rehabilitative opportunities for emerging adults.**



for immigration reform, providing training and offering advocacy to support immigrants in emergencies. **As the threat of racist state violence against immigrant communities continues, Unión Migrante rises to meet it—and they want you to join!** See the [post here](#).

### **Career Opportunities:**

#### **Client Advocate Internship with the Orleans Public Defenders, Summer 2026.**

OPD is seeking people interested in public defense and criminal justice advocacy for our Client Advocate Internship program. Interns will work to support and improve advocacy for clients through the case process, increasing success upon release. In this role, interns will assist the Client Advocate in identifying alternatives to incarceration and utilize individual mitigation plans to reduce detention for their clients and divert clients to more appropriate social services and treatment. **Applications are open until May 8th for the Summer 2026 Term.** [See more about this opportunity here](#) and [see the application here](#).

#### **Investigator Internship with the Orleans Public Defenders, Fall 2026.**

OPD is seeking individuals interested in indigent defense to join their Investigative Internship program. Interns in OPD's program assist staff investigators with case preparation and investigation on misdemeanor and felony criminal cases in Orleans Parish Criminal District Court, Municipal Court, and Juvenile Court. **Applications are open until June 26th for the Fall 2026 Term.** [See more about this opportunity here](#) and [see the application here](#).

#### **Youth Advocate at the Louisiana Center for**

*Evan Miller, 17 (right) and his codefendant in court. Miller pleaded guilty and received a sentence of Life Without the Possibility of Parole for a crime he committed in 2003 when he was 14 years old.*

Emerging adulthood is the transitional stage in development between adolescence and adulthood, often marked by instability and experimentation (Arnett, 2000). **Because the prefrontal cortex is still developing, emerging adults are not fully mature and lack full decision-making capacities.** Their brains are still malleable, so they can learn and adapt quickly, but positive or negative outcomes may depend on their past experiences and present opportunities. **For example, psychological and socioeconomic problems, such as mental health, housing, or financial struggles, can surface as emerging adults are expected to take on adult roles. Consequently, their coping mechanisms and responses to challenges may be in part dependent on their maturity level, emotional regulation, and circumstances.**

**Recognizing these vulnerabilities and opportunities has pushed reforms to consider emerging adult development in justice responses. Some scholars have encouraged applying juvenile sentencing protections to emerging adults.** Others have emphasized rehabilitation programs focused on incarcerated emerging adults' needs and their capacity to change. These initiatives, like the Young Adult Program at Elayn Hunt Correctional Center in Louisiana that focuses on 18-25-year-olds, can help address specific challenges for emerging adults in prison and key opportunities for rehabilitative growth. Research, advocacy, and support for rehabilitation have contributed to such changes in emerging adult justice responses.

Despite this, not all states have implemented policies that treat emerging adults less punitively. We know public opinion plays a role in changing justice policy, and numerous factors influence complex opinions of punishment, but people in the United States generally support rehabilitative responses (Frost, 2010). **Although, when people are asked about their attitudes toward punishment, their answers may become less punitive when additional details are introduced.** For example, someone might be less punitive if they know the emerging adult convicted of murder had a history of abuse or a brain injury (Laugalis, 2026). **Thus, how information is presented and perceived can influence opinions of appropriate justice responses.**

Knowledge of developmental science can also inform justice decisions, whether that is in the courtroom during sentencing, in rehabilitation programs or incarcerated settings, or in legislation. Research provides evidence that emerging adulthood is a distinct stage in development, but applying developmental science to justice is not simple. **The case for developmentally appropriate justice responses to emerging adults is still a new endeavor and it can benefit from further research that examines how emerging adulthood is considered in justice decisions like sentencing and parole (Laugalis, 2025; 2026).** Programs that have been implemented to address emerging adult needs in incarcerated settings should also be evaluated to guide evidence-based policy development. Research should continue to examine the constitutionality of emerging adult extreme sentencing, as well as the public's support, or lack of support, for these policies. **Overall, expanding our knowledge of the developmental impacts incarceration has on emerging adults and implementing evidence-based responses that increase public safety, reduce harm, and facilitate rehabilitation could make the United States justice system more just.**

**Children's Rights in Baton Rouge.** LCCR is seeking a Social Worker for the Baton Rouge Client Services Team. The role's primary responsibility is to provide mentorship and case management to help clients reach their goals in court and in the community. The LCCR is a non-profit law office that fights to keep children out of the justice system so they can thrive in their homes and communities. Applications are open until May 15th. [See more here.](#)

Punitive policies in the United States like life without parole have been scrutinized even by global human rights organizations (United Nations, 2023). **Sentencing emerging adults to life without the possibility of parole is essentially signaling that we, as a society and as a country, believe there is no hope for their redemption or rehabilitation, and that they do not deserve a chance.** Making this judgment about an individual who is still developing parts of their brain that affect their decision-making does not adhere to Jesuit values that focus on human dignity and concern for vulnerable people. Further, we should question if these decisions are moral, constitutional, and even humane.

**Victoria Rivera Laugalis is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Criminology and Justice at Loyola University New Orleans. Her current research focuses on juveniles and emerging adults who are sentenced to the harshest punishments. She explores legal, developmental, and biopsychosocial aspects of youth justice outcomes and issues in corrections and sentencing policy and practice.**

#### [References.](#)

*Monthly articles reflect the opinions of the authors and not necessarily those of Loyola University New Orleans. Please send feedback to [jsri@loyno.edu](mailto:jsri@loyno.edu).*

## LOYOLA UNIVERSITY NEW ORLEANS

As our prison education program continues to grow, we need to make sure that each and every one has access to an exceptional educational experience. We can't do it without your help. [Give today!](#)

#### **Published by the Jesuit Social Research Institute**

**Office Phone:** 504- 864-7746 | **E-mail:** [jsri@loyno.edu](mailto:jsri@loyno.edu) | **Website:** [www.loyno.edu/jsri](http://www.loyno.edu/jsri)  
**Mailing Address:** 6363 St. Charles Avenue, Campus Box 94, New Orleans, LA 70118

6363 St. Charles Avenue | New Orleans, LA 70118

This email was sent to .  
To ensure that you continue receiving our emails, please add us to your address book or safe list.

[manage](#) your preferences | [opt out](#) of all Loyola e-newsletters

Got this as a forward? [Sign up](#) to receive our future emails.

[Subscribe](#) to our email list.