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International

WHEN KIDS GET LIFE

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The United States is one of the only countries in the world that allows children under 18 to be sentenced to life without parole. Human Rights Watch reports that more than 2,200 inmates are currently serving life sentences without the option of parole in the US for having committed murder as teenagers, with only 12 serving the same sentence in the rest of the world. FRONTLINE producer Ofra Bikel travels to Colorado to profile five cases of juveniles sentenced to life without parole in the documentary, *When Kids Get Life*.

Colorado was an early pioneer in juvenile justice, focusing on the rehabilitation of the child rather than punishment. But in the late 1980s and 1990s, when a sharp increase in violent crimes by young offenders attracted enormous press, legislators nationwide found it easy to clamp down. They changed the definition of a life sentence and expanded the power of district attorneys to treat juveniles as adults.

In December of 1992, 15-year-old Jacob Ind murdered his mother and stepfather. Jacob's defense claimed that he had endured years of sexual abuse at the hands of his stepfather, who repeatedly raped him and his brother. But prosecutors argued that what happened at home was exaggerated as an excuse to kill, and he was sentenced to life in prison.

In 1998, Nathan Ybanez and Erik Jensen were high school students in a wealthy suburb of Denver. Erik came from a secure, affluent household; Nathan came from an abusive one. Within a year and a half of their meeting, Nathan had killed his mother, and Erik was implicated in the crime by another friend involved in the cover-up. Both Nathan and Erik were sentenced to life without parole.

Trevor Jones was trying to scam \$100 from a classmate, but the plan went awry when his gun discharged and killed Matt Foley, who was attempting to purchase the weapon. At the trial, the jury determined that Trevor had no intention of shooting anyone and what had happened was reckless manslaughter—basically a very bad accident. But because the accident occurred in the commission of armed robbery, Trevor was found guilty of felony murder and sentenced to life without parole.

Andrew Medina was also charged and sentenced for felony murder. He was only 15 when he and two acquaintances attempted a carjacking. Someone fired a gun, and the driver, 17-year-old Kristopher Lohrmeyer, died. He was convicted of felony murder and sentenced to life without parole.

In 2006, Colorado became the first state to pass a reform bill changing juvenile life without parole to 40 years before parole eligibility—but the bill was not retroactive, and 45 former juveniles now serving life without parole in Colorado—including Jacob, Erik, Nathan, Trevor and Andy—will die in prison.

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CREDITS

FRONTLINE Executive Producer: David Fanning
Producer/Writer/Director: Ofra Bikel

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