

## Understanding LWOP

Life without parole (LWOP) in Pennsylvania is more than a sentence, it's a permanent severing of hope. Known by advocates as "death by incarceration," LWOP denies individuals the possibility of redemption, rehabilitation, or reunion with loved ones. Pennsylvania holds the second-highest number of LWOP sentences in the nation, with over 5,000 people condemned to die in prison.

For women, the path to LWOP is often paved with trauma, coercion, and systemic neglect:

- **Gendered Pathways to Prison:** Many women serving LWOP were convicted under mandatory sentencing laws that ignore context, such as being coerced by abusive partners or acting in survival mode. Sheena King, sentenced at 20, was threatened into committing a fatal act by her boyfriend. Her story is tragically common.
- **Invisible Trauma:** A significant number of incarcerated women are survivors of domestic violence, sexual abuse, or childhood trauma. Yet these histories are rarely considered during trial or sentencing. Instead of receiving support, they are punished for the ways trauma shaped their decisions.
- **Barriers to Clemency:** Pennsylvania's commutation process is notoriously opaque and rare. Between 1999 and 2018, only 10 life sentences were commuted. Even when women like Gail Stallworth received unanimous support from the Board of Pardons, her second chance was revoked in an unprecedented reversal.
- **Aging Behind Bars:** Over 10% of women in Pennsylvania's two women's prisons are serving LWOP. Many entered prison in their teens or twenties and now face decades of confinement without access to meaningful rehabilitation or release.
- **Spiritual and Emotional Toll:** LWOP strips away the possibility of restoration, not just legally, but spiritually. As one woman put it, "Freedom is ensured when my ashes are shipped to my daughter in a cardboard box".