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Although the United States has the largest prison population in the world and one in nine prisoners is serving an official life sentence, little is known about why or how life-long sentences have increased in the United States. Moreover, most estimates of the number of prisoners serving life sentences omit those serving such long sentences that they are unlikely to leave prison alive. Our report seeks to fill these research gaps by identifying the number of official and de facto lifers in Washington State and the legal processes that lead to life sentences. The report also estimates the costs associated with life-long sentences, and considers whether Washington should reinstate a parole program and what that program might look like. To conduct our research, we analyzed Washington State sentencing data and held interviews with policy experts and parole board administrators across the nation. Our findings include a count and demographic profile of the Washington State population serving de facto and official life without parole sentences, identification of legislation that contributed to the growth of the lifer population, and cost estimations for the imprisonment of this population. In conclusion, we argue that reinstating a well-structured, active review board coupled with a renewed commitment to rehabilitation will best serve the public interest of Washington State.

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