

An increasing number of children are being prosecuted as adults, often for non-violent offenses. Once in the adult criminal justice system they may be held for months in jail before they are tried, and they are often denied access to education, exercise and other programs. Over four thousand children are in adult prisons where they are notoriously at risk of physical and sexual abuse, as well as the corrupting influence of people with long criminal histories.

And at every stage of the justice system, racial and ethnic minority children are present in numbers greatly out of proportion to their numbers in the community. "The evidence strongly indicates that one reason for this is discrimination on the part of law enforcement and justice system personnel," Amnesty International said.

The most disturbing aspect is that a number of the violations are actually sanctioned by US laws. In particular, the US executes people for crimes they committed when they were children, in flagrant violation of international standards.

Three such prisoners - all of them borderline mentally retarded - have been executed in the USA in 1998. Amnesty International knows of no other such executions anywhere else in the world during the year.

The USA has executed nine juvenile offenders since 1990, half the known world total in the same period. The other nine executions were carried out in five countries -- Iran, Nigeria, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Yemen. Over 70 prisoners remain on death row in the USA for crimes committed when they were 16 or 17 years old.

The USA has consistently refused to implement fully the protection of the human rights of children provided by international law.

"Children in the USA should be no less entitled to this protection than children of countries around the world," Amnesty International stressed. "We urge the US federal government to ratify without reservations all international standards for the protection of children."

"We also call on all US authorities to ensure that their laws, policies and practices are fully consistent with these standards," Amnesty International said.

Definition of who is a "child"

Under international and national laws, 18 is the most common age below which special protection is deemed to be necessary and desirable for people accused or convicted of violating criminal laws. All international standards related to the death penalty define a child as someone under 18 years of age.

ENDS.../

For copies of the report or to arrange an interview, please phone Amnesty International's Press Office on +44 171 413 5562

Amnesty International now has an ISDN line for studio-quality radio interviews from their offices in London, please phone for further details.