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FROM THE FRONT PAGE

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Locked up at 11, granted parole at 32 Inmate knows freedom

Sex offender knows release into outside world is 'going to be hard'

Khristopher Hood has something he hasn't had in decades.

Hope.

Hood was just 11 when he cried alone in his cell, locked up for molesting two younger female relatives.

Now 32 and behind bars ever since, he just earned parole. The state will release him next year after he has nine months of intensive therapy.

Sentenced to 40 years in 1995, Hood spent his childhood in state juvenile lock-up and then, after he turned 17, in adult prison.

He was granted parole after he was featured in the *Dallas Morning News* series "Kids or Criminals" about several Texas prison inmates who grew up in prison and what happens when they get out.

Because kids like Hood experience their teen years and young adulthood in prison, they miss out on what most learn during that time. They've never held a job, found a place to live or gone on a date.

In an interview at the Allred Unit near Wichita Falls, Hood said he thought he would remain in prison longer. His parole came as a surprise.

"The entire day I was in shock," he said. "They said they were going to give me a chance."

The News found that more than 2,100 inmates serving time in Texas prisons began their sentences between the ages of 11 and 16. If Texas counted 17-year-olds as adults, like most states do, the number would skyrocket to more than 8,000.

Many committed heinous crimes, including murder. But because they went in so young, they will one day return to the free world.

Christina Melton Crain, a former chairwoman of the board that oversees the Texas prison system, said inmates like Hood who have been locked up since childhood lack the life experience needed to function in society.

All released inmates will struggle, she said. But the problems are amplified for those who began their sentences as children.

"They are basically being raised in the prison system. They don't have the benefit of growing up in the community," said Crain, who now runs the nonprofit group Unlocking Doors, which helps offenders reacclimate to society by helping them find jobs and places to live.

"The maturity isn't there."

Next steps

Hood won't begin sex offender treatment until March, so his earliest parole date will be December.

The process, said Texas prison system spokesman Jason Clark, is to "enhance public safety by providing evaluation, education and treatment to offenders."

Hood hasn't had treatment since his transfer to adult prison. He had sex offender therapy as a child but was kicked out of the juvenile program and into the general population when he lied to counselors.

This time, he said, he understands how therapy can help.

"The difference is I'm wanting to succeed this time," said Hood, who was molested by other children before he was locked up.

He will have to register as a sex offender for the rest of his life. His father is also a registered sex offender and served prison time for raping Hood's mother.

Society should root for Hood to succeed after his release, Crain said.

If those released from prison find jobs and a place to live, they are more likely to thrive. Failure means violating parole, ending up on welfare or committing new crimes. That costs society more than just financially.

"It's the fiscal impact that everybody should be concerned about. But it's more than that," Crain said. "It's wanting your community to be a safe community."

"We have to take some responsibility. We have to open some doors for those who are interested in moving forward."

Tough times ahead

Hood still resembles the 11-year-old kid who stares out of the photo in his case file. He still looks young.

Every day he wears "prison whites," the white shirt and pants worn by all inmates. A tan spoon sticks out of his shirt pocket. He just finished chow: a chicken patty, beans and ketchup.

He remains in his cell more than he used to. No reason to invite trouble and mess up his parole chances.

Hood spends his days writing to halfway houses, looking for a place to live. He has no place to go once prison is no longer his home.

But he looks forward to sitting on a real couch, seeing the just-released *Star Wars* movie and maybe, one day, owning a dog.

Hood said he knows life on the outside won't be easy.

"I'm not going to lie. It's going to be hard," he said. "Last time I was out there, I had family taking care of me, and now I got to take care of myself."



Rose Back/Staff Photographer