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## Life for juveniles needs reviewing

Published Wednesday, May 6, 2009

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Joe Harris Sullivan has been a Florida prisoner for 20 of his 33 years. Just days shy of his 14th birthday, he was sentenced to life without parole for raping an elderly Escambia County woman. He expected to die behind bars, but this week the U.S. Supreme Court announced it would review his case and that of another Florida juvenile offender to consider whether sentencing a person under 18 to life without parole is cruel and unusual punishment — and unconstitutional.

Sullivan committed a horrific crime and deserves a lengthy prison sentence, but the court's review is needed. It suggests America may be ready to take a more nuanced approach to the worst juvenile criminals. Those who commit heinous crimes at any age should be punished with long sentences. Society should be protected from them. But sentencing a juvenile for life without ever reassessing if he belongs there ignores the developmental differences between children and adults. After serving an appropriate sentence, juvenile offenders should have a chance to convince a parole board they have grown up, understand the consequences of their actions and deserve another chance as adults — even if the parole board ultimately does not agree.

In recent years a closely divided high court has sensibly limited the death penalty for people with diminished capacity, such as the mentally handicapped and juveniles. In 2005, the court struck down the use of the death penalty for minors in the case of *Roper vs. Simmons*. Justice Anthony Kennedy, writing for the majority, said that the new limit was a reading of society's "evolving standards of decency."

The court made some key distinctions between adult and juvenile offenders, recognizing that minors are not fully matured and are comparatively more irresponsible, impetuous and vulnerable to negative influences. And because juveniles don't yet have fixed personalities, the court said that even a horrific crime perpetrated by a young person doesn't necessarily indicate that he is irretrievably depraved.

The same distinctions should apply when the sentence is one notch down from death. Yet more than 2,000 U.S. inmates are juvenile offenders locked away for life without parole, according to Human Rights Watch. Florida and 43 other states allow such harsh sentences.

Minors sometimes commit awful crimes with devastating consequences to their victims, and the punishment for those crimes should fit the circumstances. Giving juvenile offenders a chance at parole still would mean that those felons who committed crimes that make them a continuing danger to society can be kept in prison for life. But the very nature of youth has always merited special consideration in the criminal justice system, and that should include giving young perpetrators a chance to prove that they have reformed.

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