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## Court recognized limitations of youth

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The U.S. Supreme Court did something Monday for which judges are often criticized: It issued a ruling that significantly changes the law based on changing social values. And the court did the right thing.

The court, in a 6-3 ruling, held unconstitutional a Florida man's sentence to life in prison without possible parole for a crime committed when he was a juvenile. The crime was robbery, not murder, and that violated the Eighth Amendment to the Constitution, which forbids "cruel and unusual punishments." The court, as is its tradition, applies "evolving standards of decency" to define those terms today as opposed to 1791 when the Eighth Amendment was ratified.

The court in 2005 said juveniles should not face the death penalty under any circumstances, which was the right decision.

The court was also right in Monday's ruling to prohibit life sentences without the possibility of parole for offenders who commit crimes other than murder when they were juveniles.

Short of the death penalty, a sentence of life in prison is the most severe penalty the state can mete out. It should be reserved for the most heinous crimes for criminal convicts who show no hope of redemption and are thus a continuing threat to society. Exceptions should be made for juveniles, however, because children clearly are not capable of making the same rational judgments as adults.

In this case, Terrance Jamar Graham was convicted of kidnapping and armed robbery committed when he was about a month short of his 18th birthday, and while on probation for an earlier robbery. The judge concluded Graham was incapable of rehabilitation, and handed down the life sentence, going even further than the prosecutor's recommendation of a limited term of years.

This denied Graham "any chance to later demonstrate that he is fit to rejoin society based solely on a non-homicide crime that he committed while he was a child in the eyes of the law," Justice Anthony Kennedy wrote for the court. "This the Eighth Amendment does not permit."

The court left open the possibility that offenders might be kept in prison for life for juvenile crimes other than murder. But they at least must have an opportunity to demonstrate they have changed and deserve another chance at freedom. The court left it to the states to figure that out - presumably through a parole-review process.

This could be life changing for as many as seven inmates serving life sentences in Iowa for non-murder crimes committed as juveniles.

"What the state must do," the court said, "is give defendants like Graham some meaningful opportunity to obtain release based on demonstrated maturity and rehabilitation." That is reasonable: The prospect of a lifetime in prison without any hope is beyond cruel, and it removes any reason for offenders to strive to change their lives. Some offenders are capable of making that change, and this ruling gives them a chance to demonstrate that.

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NO, I have some rules!

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