



U.S. Supreme Court makes right decision on juvenile sentences

By Star-Ledger Editorial Board

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File photo/Mark Wilson/Getty Images

A guard stands watch in front of United States Supreme Court in Washington, DC, in this August 2009 file photo.

The U.S. Supreme Court this week ruled that sentencing juveniles who do not commit murder to life-without-parole constitutes cruel and unusual punishment.

The court's 5-to-4 decision gives 100 young offenders across the country a chance for eventual release. That includes the subject of the case, Terrance Graham, who was 17 when he was convicted of armed robbery while on probation for another violent offense.

The court's decision ends a barbaric form of juvenile sentencing practiced by 37 states and the federal government. Others, including New Jersey, do not impose such harsh sentences.

Serious crimes, especially violent crimes, call for serious punishment. But scientific evidence shows adolescents often do not have the same capacity as adults to distinguish right from wrong, to control impulses, or to comprehend consequences. The court noted that when it struck down the death penalty for juveniles in 2005.

The ruling won't free all juveniles held under these harsh sentences. But it will at least allow for the possibility that those who have rehabilitated themselves will have a shot at parole. Laws that fail to recognize that possibility are inhumane, as the court's majority rightly ruled.

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