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Editorial

Cruel life in prison

Juvenile offenders should not receive a sentence that offers no hope for eventual release.

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The U.S. Supreme Court recognized in 2005 that it is unconstitutionally cruel to execute people for crimes committed before they were 18, because youths lack the sense of responsibility that society requires of adults. Their personalities are not yet fixed; they are more susceptible to the negative influences of other people or events. Society's understandable demand for retribution is necessarily blunted when the perpetrator of a crime is a juvenile. Likewise, the threat of a stiff penalty cannot have the same deterrent effect on a youth as it does on an adult; young people have too little experience to fully grasp the consequences of their actions.

The court on Monday will hear arguments in the cases of two Floridians sentenced, in effect, to eventually die in prison because they lack even the slightest chance of release on parole.

The same reasoning that bars execution for crimes committed in youth should also block such sentences of life without hope, at the very least for youths whose crimes fall short of murder.

Terrance Jamar Graham was 16 when he joined two others in a failed attempt to rob a restaurant; a year later, he was on probation when he participated in a home invasion robbery. His crimes were brutal; he was a repeat offender; and he deserved to be punished, to be imprisoned, and even, perhaps, to be sentenced to life. But not without a chance, in the future, for a court or parole board to review his growth and development and consider another chance at parole.

There are, to be sure, youths who mature earlier than others, just as there are adults who never fully mature and never can be honestly held to account for their actions. But there must be a line, and age 18 is the point at which society determines people are ready to sign contracts, marry without parental consent, serve on juries and be drafted into the military.

Society can and should countenance a hopeless existence in prison for adult perpetrators. But not for juveniles. The U.S. is, for now, the only nation that has not banned life in prison without parole for juvenile offenders, and more than 2,000 are serving such terms behind bars.

But there are, fortunately, few in the position of Joe Sullivan, sentenced in Florida to life without parole for a crime he committed when he was only 13. That kind of sentence for a crime committed at such an early age shocks the conscience and cannot be seen as anything but unconstitutionally unusual -- as well as cruel.

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