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Except murder, life for juveniles is too long

Register editorial

The idea of life in prison suggests the condemned has absolutely no hope of redemption. That may not be the case when the sentence is meted out to juveniles with an entire lifetime ahead.

Critics of severe penalties for crimes committed by juveniles say offenders in their teens are not fully developed mentally or emotionally, and cannot be held to the same standard as adults. The U.S. Supreme Court accepted that argument in a 2005 ruling striking down capital punishment for juveniles as cruel and unusual. The court is now being asked to apply that to life sentences for juveniles in non-murder cases.

The court should do just that. To use the court's own standard, it is "grossly disproportionate" to sentence a teenager to life in prison for any crime short of murder. It is "cruel and unusual" under the Constitution to consign a youngster to the prospect of life behind bars without the opportunity - ever - for parole and freedom.

In the two Florida cases argued before the court Monday, trial judges sentenced offenders to life in prison for crimes committed when they were under 18, but they were prosecuted as if they were adults. In one case, Joe Harris Sullivan, who was just 13 at the time of the offense, was convicted of burglary and the brutally violent rape of an elderly woman. In the other, Terrance Jamar Graham was sentenced to life in prison for violating probation for a robbery and assault conviction when he was 16.

Neither is a poster child for any cause. They committed serious crimes, and as such should pay a penalty. But sentencing a teenager to life means potentially 70 or 80 years in prison, which is hardly proportional to many other sentences short of murder. There should be hope these young criminals can be reformed. If not, the notion of "corrections" has no meaning.

Some advocate at the very least drawing a line for prosecuting juveniles as adults at age 15. Iowa does not prosecute juveniles under age 14 as adults. And, while it's possible for a juvenile to receive a life sentence for crimes other than first-degree murder (such as violent rape), this state has not shown much appetite to do that. Of the 45 Iowa inmates serving life sentences for crimes committed as juveniles, 38 were convicted of first-degree murder. Seven were convicted of kidnapping, but three of those also had convictions for murder in the second degree.

There is a middle ground. The Iowa Legislature last session considered a bill that would have granted a parole hearing to an inmate 15 years after being sentenced to life as a juvenile. The proposal died, but should be reintroduced and approved. These young inmates should have a chance to show they have, in fact, matured and earned the right to return to society.
