

Some young criminals should have a second chance

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Thursday, 12 November 2009

The U.S. Supreme Court this week is debating the constitutionality of sentencing juvenile criminals to life sentences without the possibility of parole.

A group of high-profile people — among them an actor/director, a former assistant U.S. attorney, a critically-acclaimed poet and retired U.S. Senator Alan Simpson — all former juvenile offenders, argue that courts should have discretion in deciding whether young criminals in non-homicide cases should, at some point, have a second chance.

Two cases being appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court have brought the issue to national attention. Lawyers for the defendants in each case argue that life sentences with no chance for parole amount to cruel and unusual punishment — and consequently violate their clients' constitutional rights.

Make no mistake about it: No one is downplaying the severity of the crimes committed — in these two cases or others nationwide.

Supporters of the appeals simply maintain that cases involving juveniles should be scrutinized on a case-by-case basis instead of being dictated by mandatory sentencing rules.

In a recent opinion piece in *The Washington Post*, Simpson wrote, "If ... a parole board finds out that a miscreant hasn't changed, then keep him or her in prison. But some juvenile offenders make real efforts while they are in jail, and we should make honest adjustments for them."

It's a rare adult who can say he or she never did anything stupid or reckless in their teenage years. Consequences are akin to a foreign language for many teens, but as adults those same people often begin to make better choices.

Juvenile offenders who commit serious, non-homicide crimes should be given the chance to reform and become productive members of society — after doing their time.

Simpson and the other former youthful offenders who support the appeals are proof that some "bad kids" turn their lives around.

The headline of Simpson's *Washington Post* piece summed it up: A mandatory life sentence is, in some cases, "A sentence too cruel for children."