



Don't eliminate hope / Juvenile offenders deserve chance to reform



Juvenile offenders deserve chance to reform

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Four years ago, the U.S. Supreme Court outlawed the execution of people for crimes committed when they were juveniles.

The court rightly concluded that such sentences violated the Eighth Amendment's proscription of cruel and unusual punishment.

In his opinion for the five-member majority, Justice Anthony Kennedy noted that those under 18 lack the maturity of adults and are unduly subject to the influence of others.

"From a moral standpoint, it would be misguided to equate the failings of a minor with those of an adult, for a greater possibility exists that a minor's character deficiencies will be reformed," Kennedy wrote.

The court is now considering whether it is equally unconstitutional to sentence juveniles to lifetime prison terms, without the possibility of parole, at least for crimes other than murder.

Can there be any doubt?

This page is by no means soft on crime. And the two Florida cases before the Supreme Court are serious.

One involves Terrance Graham, 22, who was convicted of armed robbery when he was 16. A year later, Graham, the learning-disabled son of drug addicts, participated in a home-invasion robbery with older youths. He was not convicted of that crime, but received a life-without-parole sentence for violating the terms of his probation on the robbery conviction.

The other is the case of Joe Sullivan, now 34, sentenced to life without parole for sexually assaulting a 72-year-old woman when he was 13. Sullivan, too, is mentally impaired and had older accomplices. They testified against him and received lesser sentences.

But as odious as Sullivan's crime is, forever locking away a 13-year-old, with no hope of parole, cannot be seen as anything but cruel. Likewise, Graham's case hardly warrants such a draconian sentence.

The United States is one of a very few, if not the only, nation in the world that locks up juveniles forever for non-homicide crimes.

Most states in the union have not imposed such a penalty.

More than 100 prisoners nationwide are serving life without parole for crimes committed as juveniles. The majority are in Florida penitentiaries. California, with four, is one of the six other states with such prisoners.

During oral arguments last week, most of the justices sounded sympathetic to at least parts of the arguments from the petitioners' lawyers.

We are, too, but part ways with lawyers for Sullivan who went so far as to advocate that the justices forbid life-without-parole sentences for all offenders 14 and younger, even if the crime is murder. In some such cases, a guaranteed lifetime sentence might well be warranted after a fair trial and thorough sentencing evaluation.

Indeed, there are certainly non-murderer juvenile offenders who deserve to spend their lives behind bars. But not without any hope, any chance to mature, repent and reform.

Juvenile criminals, at least those who have not committed murder, deserve a chance to prove that they have turned their lives around.

That's what the nation's parole boards are for.

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