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## Juvenile lifers deserve second look

The Tampa Tribune

Joe Harris Sullivan was 13 in 1989 when he committed the crime that would put him away for life without possibility of parole: He raped an elderly woman. He had committed 17 other crimes in the two years before the brutal attack and his trial as an adult.

Terrance Graham was 17 when he took part in a home invasion, violating the rules of his probation for a previous violent crime. The judge determined he was not redeemable and a menace to society. He sentenced him to life without hope of release.

The boys' crimes did not include murder or attempted murder. They were violent but nonlethal.

The U.S. Supreme Court is currently reviewing the two cases to decide whether sentencing juveniles to spend the rest of their lives in prison with no hope of getting out amounts to cruel and unusual punishment in violation of the Eighth Amendment. We believe it does.

Teenagers are different from adults. Research bears out what most people intuitively know: Young people are not fully formed. They have neurological, psychological and developmental differences that set them apart from mature adults.

It's true that juveniles are capable of committing horrific crimes, but short of killing, they should at some point have the chance to prove they've changed as they matured.

Lawyers for the lifers hope the court will extend the reasoning it used to forbid the death penalty for juveniles. After all, sentencing an adolescent to life without any possibility of future freedom condemns him to die in prison. The sentence rejects any hope that he will change for the better.

Moreover, the fact that states seldom choose to impose the sentence on juveniles - only 106 prisoners in six states, including Florida's 77 - for offenses that don't include murder or attempted murder.

In oral arguments last week, the more conservative justices didn't seem convinced there is a constitutional violation. Chief Justice John Roberts suggested a proportionality test that would take into account the particular circumstances of the juvenile defendant - how old the individual was, the nature of the crimes and other factors - in sentencing.

There is merit in that suggestion, but there are ample examples of people in this country who were troubled youths and committed shocking crimes but served their time and then made something of themselves. A brief filed on behalf of the petitioners by, among others, former Wyoming Sen. Alan Simpson and the actor Charles S. Dutton, makes a powerful argument that kids can change their ways.

"It is impossible to know what any juvenile offender will grow up to become," their brief says. "But it is also impossible to conclude that any juvenile offender has no redeeming potential."

Juveniles who commit serious crimes deserve to serve serious time, perhaps even a life sentence. But they should have an opportunity someday to show they have changed and are deserving of another chance at freedom.