



Chance for change: Life sentence removes hope for juvenile reform

By Patriot-News Editorial Board

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The question before the U.S. Supreme Court is: Do we believe juveniles sentenced to life in prison can reform?

Last week, the justices faced this question in a case involving two men serving life sentences for serious crimes they committed as teenagers. Attorneys for the two Florida prisoners argue that not giving adolescents hope for parole violates the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution and its prohibition against cruel and unusual punishment.

As it is, the United States is the only nation that sentences teenagers who are convicted of a nonhomicide crime to life in prison with no chance of parole. The number of prisoners nationwide is 109 and 77 of them are incarcerated in Florida.

The two men at the center of the Supreme Court case are hardly poster children for leniency, and no one would argue they should get anything other than tough sentences for their crimes.

Joe Sullivan, now 34, raped an elderly woman when he was 13. The judge called him incorrigible at his trial.

Terrance Graham, 22, was responsible for a home invasion while on parole for armed burglary when he was 17. The judge in his case lectured that he had thrown his life away following a young life of crime.

But as a society do we say that a 13-year-old or even a 17-year-old — who has not committed murder — does not get a chance to rehabilitate, that they are sentenced to die in prison?

Supporters of changing the law argue juveniles deserve hope while incarcerated and say adolescents sentenced for serious crimes should not be judged in the same way as an adult. Teenagers are more impetuous, might still lack good judgment and have not necessarily developed the skills needed to deal with peer pressure.

The case is part of a larger conversation the country is having this decade about young prisoners.

In 2005, Supreme Court justices ruled in *Roper v. Simmons* that states could not use the death penalty on any prisoner under age 18.

In 2008, the court also ruled that states could not execute anyone who had been convicted of crimes other than murder.

This year, the Judiciary Committee held hearings on a measure requiring states to grant parole hearings after 15 years to prisoners sentenced to life without parole for nonlethal crimes they committed as juveniles.

The two court rulings are good ones and Congress is right to look at ways to change our criminal justice system as it relates to juveniles.

The age of a person sentenced to prison for serious crimes must be considered.

There is no mold that every criminal convicted of armed robbery or rape fits into. Juveniles might deserve to spend many years in prison but in the end, they must be given a sense that society believes they can change.

The words of Justice Anthony Kennedy during the *Roper vs. Simmons* case decision hold true for this discussion as well: "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."

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