



Teenage 'lifers': Court should end no-parole terms for youths

By Star-Ledger Editorial Board/The Star-Led...

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Khalif Williams was 16 when he was charged with raping and robbing a 19-year-old East Orange woman at gunpoint while she waited at a Newark bus stop in 2007. He was charged as an adult and, in May, he was sentenced to 15 years in state prison.

Under state law, Williams, now 18, must serve about 12 years of his sentence before becoming eligible for parole. Had he committed this crime in Florida, however, the teenager could have been made to live out his life in prison without the possibility of a second chance.

"To sentence someone under 18 to life in prison without acknowledging the possibility of rehabilitation is wrong," says **Cecilia Zalkind**, executive director of Association for Children of New Jersey in Trenton.

The U.S. Supreme Court heard arguments this week on whether life sentences with no parole imposed on two Florida juveniles constitute cruel and unusual punishment. **Joe Sullivan** was 13 when he and two older boys sexually assaulted a 72-year-old woman. He has been in prison 20 years so far. **Terrance Graham** was 17 when he was convicted of armed robbery while on probation for another violent offense.

There's no question these were serious crimes, but neither involved a homicide, and the question before the court is whether a juvenile should be locked away forever for a crime short of murder. Around 106 young offenders are serving life sentences in the United States for crimes in which no one was killed — 77 in Florida, which has one of the most punitive juvenile systems in the country.

The Supreme Court banned the death penalty for juveniles in 2005, saying adolescents do not have the same maturity to determine right and wrong as adults and noting their potential for rehabilitation.

It was a wise decision. But given that reasoning, it is cruel and contradictory for the court to approve sentencing juveniles to life in prison with no chance of release.

Many states, including New Jersey, have made sentencing juvenile offenders a more rehabilitative process. The state has invested time and resources into reentry programs that focus more on helping teenagers turn their lives around than punishing them. And while these programs do not give a pass to serious juvenile offenders like Williams, they do have a greater emphasis on educational and social programs than punishment.

Serious crimes call for serious time, but locking up teenagers and throwing away the key will do nothing to help them change for the better. The court is expected to make a decision by spring. We hope it will rule in their favor.

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