

PAUL FARMER

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## A 2d chance at freedom for juvenile offenders

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THE UNITED States is currently the only country in the world that sentences minors who commit crimes to life in prison without any hope for parole. Soon, the Supreme Court will declare whether we change this policy.

Today, the court will hear oral arguments in two cases, Sullivan v. Florida and Graham v. Florida, and later decide whether sentencing juveniles to life without parole for offenses not involving a homicide qualify as cruel and unusual punishment under the Eighth Amendment. The young man in one case was convicted of a sexual assault at 13; the other, of an armed burglary at 16 and a probation violation at 17.

These are serious crimes and both young men must be held accountable. The question before the court is whether they should be held accountable in a way that takes into consideration their immaturity, lack of judgment, vulnerability to peer pressure, and - perhaps most important - their capacity for redemption, growth, and change. If the court strikes down life without parole for juveniles as unconstitutional, no offender would have an automatic right to parole release. Juvenile offenders would simply be given the opportunity to appear before a parole board and make the case that they have changed and deserve another chance.

As I have seen in Haiti, in Rwanda, and in the other countries where I have lived - and in the prisons, squatter settlements, and cities, rich and poor, in which I've worked - people share certain innate human values. One of them is that children should be afforded greater care, protection, and forgiveness.

And when I return to the United States, I am reminded that a group of our children - some of them as young as 13 - are separated from their families and communities for the rest of their lives, even if they are later rehabilitated and no longer deemed to pose a threat to others.

Article 37 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that children must not be subjected to torture, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishments, including capital punishment or life imprisonment without the possibility of release. Only two nations in the world have not ratified this convention: Somalia and the United States. It is noteworthy that sentences of life without parole for juveniles were uncommon in the United States before the 1990s, a period of fear about a potential rise in juvenile crime that was based on data later proven false.

The United States stands apart from its European allies in perpetuating this violation of human rights. In Italy, the maximum sentence for a person under 18 for any crime is 24 years. In Germany, it is 10 years. In England and Wales, judges must impose a sentence that is roughly half the term that an adult would be given in the same circumstances. The English law is particularly instructive, given the historic ties between the two countries and the fact that American law is largely derived from England's. In fact, the Eighth Amendment traces its roots to the Magna Carta.

There are those who argue that international laws and norms should have no bearing on how the United States decides to dispense justice. But having treated thousands of children all over the world, I can say with confidence that American children are not more vicious, less human, or less deserving of mercy and compassion than children in any other country. Every other nation in the world finds ways to hold young people accountable for their actions without sentencing them to languish in prison until they die. The United States must do the same for its children.

*Paul Farmer, MD, PhD is professor of social medicine in the Department of Global Health and Social Medicine at Harvard Medical School, where he is chairman and is cofounder of Partners In Health, an international nonprofit health care organization. He is the author of "Pathologies of Power" and co-editor of "Global Health in Times of Violence." ■*