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Too young to die in prison

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Teenagers serving life sentences without the possibility of parole have been condemned to die in prison. It's a death sentence without an executioner, it's perilously close to cruel and usual punishment, and it simply shouldn't be allowed.

States, such as Maryland, that let juveniles spend the rest of their lives behind bars ignore what researchers and others have shown to be true: These offenders lack the physical and emotional maturity to make rational decisions. A life sentence, with the appropriate parole eligibility requirements and restrictions, would keep these young criminals behind bars for a lengthy period and prevent their release until an appropriate time.

A report issued last week by the Alabama-based Equal Justice Initiative found that nationally, more than 2,225 juveniles, age 17 and younger, have received life without parole sentences. Of those, 73 were 13 or 14 - children by almost any measure - when they committed their crimes.

In some states, life without parole is mandatory for certain crimes, which precludes a judge from considering a youth's family background, schooling and emotional health. That is neither fair nor just.

In Maryland, even without a mandatory imperative, 18 inmates are serving such sentences for crimes they committed as 15-, 16- or 17-year-olds.

Their crimes may have been terrible, but there is a reason we have different systems for juvenile offenders: Society recognizes the differences between teenagers and adults; the key difference is that parts of their brains that control impulses, emotions and reasoning are less

developed.

Juveniles are barred from buying cigarettes or beer; they can't enlist in the military and aren't supposed to watch R-rated movies unless accompanied by a parent or guardian. And yet when they commit a serious crime, it's as if they have morphed into adults for purposes of their punishment.

Their age makes them vulnerable to older criminals who single them out to commit serious crimes because they can be easily influenced and intimidated, and potentially can escape the adult system. But, in fact, many of them don't.

The Supreme Court recognized all these differences when it barred the execution of juveniles, no matter the crime. But a mandatory life sentence without possibility of parole is just as fatal in its way, and should be prohibited for the same reasons.

Until the practice is outlawed nationally, the Maryland legislature should exempt juveniles from life without parole sentences and improve prison education and training programs. That would give youthful offenders serving time in adult prisons a chance to reform and show they can lead productive lives outside prison someday.

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