

Los Angeles Times

Letters to the editor

October 9, 2009

The crime of kids behind bars

Re "Oyez! Oyez! Oyez! The high court should reject sentences of life in prison without parole for juveniles," Opinion, Oct. 5

Thank you for printing professor Bernard Harcourt's Op-Ed article condemning our country's practice of sending juveniles to prison for life. Although the Supreme Court finally abolished the death penalty for juveniles, condemning children to die in prison is really the same thing, and in many ways worse. The death penalty is at least reserved for murderers, but children have been sent to die in prison for lesser crimes.

We spend tens of thousands of dollars a year to warehouse our offenders. Much of that goes for the salaries and overtime pay of prison guards. The guards benefit from these draconian sentences, but the rest of us don't. Shame on a nation that gives up on its own children.

Ellen J. Eggers
Sacramento

The Op-Ed article resonated with me in a very personal way. I lost my child to violence by a young offender, but I don't believe the offender should be locked away for life.

I have spent much of my adult life promoting peace amid violent communities in L.A. In my view, we cannot afford to lose another child to violence, and therefore we should not impose an irrevocable life sentence on any youth, including the one who killed my son.

Individuals sentenced as youth who are fit to reenter society later in life should be considered for parole by the same authorities who are entrusted with making parole decisions in the cases of thousands of adult offenders.

Even given the trauma and incredible loss my family experienced, I still believe that young people need to be held accountable in a way that reflects their unique ability to grow and change.

Aqeela Sherrills
Los Angeles

Our society recognizes that juveniles differ from adults in their thinking, reasoning and decision-making capacities. Research also demonstrates that adolescents actually use their brains in fundamentally different ways than adults. As a result, they are more likely to act on impulse, without fully considering the consequences of their actions.

In 2005, the Supreme Court ruled that the juvenile death penalty was unconstitutional. Writing for the majority, Justice Anthony Kennedy said: "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." The same reasoning is equally valid with respect to life without parole.

This term, the court will consider if juvenile offenders should be eligible for such sentences. Hopefully, it will concur with the growing public sentiment that it's time to stop sentencing young people to die in jail.

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