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Former Republican Senator and Charles 'Roc' Dutton Want No More Life in Prison for Teenagers

By: Sherrilyn A. Ifill
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The new Supreme Court, with Justice Sonia Sotomayor, will decide just how soon we give up on kids—usually black kids.

When he was in high school, he helped burn down a federal building. He shot and killed a cow for fun. He stole. He violated his probation, and one night after a bar fight, he struck a police officer.

In his own words, he was a “monster.” If he had received the fullest possible sentence for his crimes, he would have spent 20 years or more, in jail. If he’d been sentenced to life in prison without parole, as some 13- and 14-year-old Americans are, he would never have gone on to college or law school. He would never have served 18 years in the U.S. Senate.

His name is Alan K. Simpson, the Wyoming Republican, whom, when he left the Senate in 1997, few would have recognized as the high school boy who had so often been in trouble with the law. He credits that night spent in jail after “belting a cop,” (the girlfriend who became his wife of 55 years refused to bail him out), as the turning point that changed his life.

Simpson knows that teenagers, even the toughest ones, can turn their lives around. He’s joined in an [amicus brief](#) other accomplished men—including Emmy-winning actor [Charles “Roc” Dutton](#) and author [R. Dwayne Betts](#)—both of whom were convicted of crimes as juveniles, and then [turned their lives around](#). They’re [asking the Supreme Court](#) to strike down the practice of sentencing teenagers to life in prison without parole for non-homicide offenses.

This is one of the most important cases to come before the Supreme Court—which began its new term Monday. The two consolidated Florida cases that bring this issue before the court expose the practice in the Sunshine State of deciding that the lives of teenagers are over before they’ve really begun. In [Graham v. Florida](#), Terrance Graham was sentenced to life without parole for an armed robbery he committed when he was 16. Joe Sullivan was convicted of committing sexual battery when he was 13.

Just five years ago, the Supreme Court decided in [Roper v. Simmons](#) that the imposition of the death penalty on juveniles violates the 8th Amendment prohibition against “cruel and unusual punishment.” Graham and Sullivan ultimately ask the court to determine whether imposing a form of death on teenagers for non-homicide offenses is similarly unconstitutional. There are currently nine individuals serving life-without-parole terms for offenses they committed when they were 13 or 14.

Eight of the nine are black.

When the Supreme Court decides later this year whether a state can constitutionally deny teenagers the kind of second chance that enabled Alan K. Simpson and R. Dwayne Betts to turn their lives around, it will not only decide the fate of nine "lifers." The court's decision will also define its character and that of our country for years to come.

*Sherrilyn A. Ifill is a regular contributor to **The Root**.*

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