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Life terms for teens are unjust, lawyer says

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The lawyer for a 31-year-old woman serving life in prison for a murder she committed as a teen called Tuesday on the Iowa Supreme Court to treat children differently under the state's sentencing laws.

"It is our position that a judgment that there is no distinction between a child of 14 and an adult" is improper, said attorney Brian Stevenson of Equal Justice Initiatives, an Alabama-based juvenile-advocate group. "To say to any child of 14 that 'you're only fit to die in prison' is cruel and unusual."

A state lawyer countered that some crimes deserve an absolute punishment regardless of age.

"I think we all agree that we don't want this to happen to a typical 14-year-old," Assistant Iowa Attorney General Thomas Andrews told the justices. "But Ruthann Veal is not a typical 14-year-old."

Veal was a heavily abused child whom Andrews described as "a violent recidivist." Court records say she was 14 years and 11 months old in June 1993 when she fled from a juvenile group home, entered the Waterloo home of Catherine Haynes, 66, grabbed a kitchen knife and attacked her.

Documents say Veal broke four of Haynes' ribs and stabbed the retired librarian 23 times until the blade of the knife broke off. She then stole Haynes' car and credit cards and left for two days, driving around with friends to places in Waterloo, Cedar Rapids and Iowa City.

Arrested and charged with first-degree murder, Veal was tried as an adult and convicted in 1995. She will be in prison for the rest of her life unless Stevenson can convince Iowa Supreme Court justices that the punishment was unjust.

Stevenson, whose organization is involved in similar cases around the country, stressed Tuesday that Iowa legislators had never expressly sanctioned the notion of sending a 14-year-old to prison for life. Justices could easily conclude that two separate decisions - lowering the age at which teens can be tried as adults and instituting life without parole as a punishment for Iowa's most serious crimes - were made without considering the possibility of a case like Veal's, he said.

"The Legislature has never expressly considered the question," Stevenson said. "Every state that has had an express conversation about this has set the minimum age at (at least) 16."

Veal's attorneys filed the latest legal challenge after a 2005 U.S. Supreme Court ruling outlawed use of the death penalty for offenders under 18. The 5-4 decision in *Roper vs. Simmons* cited a body of scientific evidence pointing to an inherent lack of responsibility and maturity among children.

Iowa prosecutors, who contend death penalty decisions are irrelevant since Iowa has no death penalty, defend extreme punishments for extreme crimes.

"Throughout all of human history, murder is different and usually responded to by death for the murderer," Andrews told justices. "We've mitigated that to some extent in our society."

Veal is one of three Iowa inmates now serving life for crimes committed at 14.

Stevenson argued Tuesday for a quick rejection of Veal's sentence, although the first question for

justices is whether Veal's case is barred by the expiration of a three-year window for filing legal challenges. Stevenson said Veal would be happy if the case were sent back to Black Hawk County for further proceedings. However, he believes justices could overturn the sentence if they wished.
