THE ISSUE There’s something wrong with sentencing 13- and 14-year-olds to life in prison with no chance, ever, for parole.

We don’t let 13- and 14-year-olds buy cigarettes, get married or quit school. That’s because we recognize that young teenagers aren’t responsible enough or mature enough to make such serious decisions.

Our justice system, too, should recognize a clear distinction between childhood and adulthood. Usually, it does.

But a striking new study has documented 73 people serving lifetime prison sentences - with no chance, ever, for release - for crimes they committed when they were 13 or 14 years old.

Take a moment to think about that.

Two of these 73 cases are in Alabama. The rest are scattered in 18 other states, with the highest number of them in Pennsylvania and Florida. Seven of them involve crimes that did not even include homicide.

The Equal Justice Initiative, a Montgomery-based nonprofit law firm that conducted the study, argues such severe sentences for young teenagers are not constitutional and not acceptable in the world at large.

"The United States is the only country in the world where a 13-year-old is known to be sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole,” the report says. "'The Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by every country except the United States and Somalia, forbids this practice, and at least 132 countries have rejected the sentence altogether.'”

The reason is simple. Children might be capable of committing adult crimes, but they can’t be held equally responsible. They’re still developing the parts of their brains that give them the capacity to make sound and moral judgments. They aren’t even deemed grown-up enough to handle R-rated movies. Yet we send them to adult prisons to spend the rest of their lives?

In the examples cited by the Equal Justice Initiative, it’s clear the children who ended up serving lifewithout-parole sentences had far greater problems than their youth. They came from worlds of abuse, violence and neglect where they were exploited and exposed to horrible conditions.

When they got in trouble, they didn’t have the kinds of stable families that invite more lenient treatment from judges and juries. Moreover, they didn’t have the money to hire top-notch defense lawyers. Most of them were black or Hispanic. In adult prisons, many of them became targets for sexual attacks and other assaults by older inmates.

None of this is to say the teens shouldn’t have faced consequences. Or even that there might be some 13-year-olds who will never be able to live safely in society. But generally speaking, life without parole should be reserved for fully responsible
people who did something heinous and who will continue to pose a threat to society. Surely, that cannot be said for certain about children who have barely hit puberty.

In some cases, even the victims or their survivors want the children to have a chance for parole.

One example is Ashley Jones, a Birmingham girl who in childhood was abandoned at crack houses, sexually assaulted and otherwise abused - and who, at 14, helped her older boyfriend kill her grandfather and aunt. Her grandmother and sister, who were also injured in the terrible crime, believe Jones, now 22, should have a chance at freedom.

But as it stands, she is destined to live behind bars until the day she dies, no matter what kind of adult she has become. There’s something wrong with that picture.

---- Index References ----

News Subject: (Parents & Parenting (1PA25); Health & Family (1HE30))

Region: (USA (1US73); Americas (1AM92); Alabama (1AL90); North America (1NO39))

Language: EN

Other Indexing: (EQUAL JUSTICE INITIATIVE) (Jones)

Word Count: 689

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