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Posted on Wed, Jun. 27, 2012 08:14 PM

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Commentary

Young criminals deserve a chance at redemption

BY MARY SANCHEZ
The Kansas City Star

Ask any insightful parent.

Kids' brains develop over time. That's why young people are so frustratingly impulsive, react to peer pressure more than adults, fail to appreciate risks and consequences.

And it's as true for the kid who crashes the car as it is for those who commit horrific crimes of violence.

This week, the U.S. Supreme Court ingrained that sort of parental wisdom into case law. Citing a growing body of scientific research, the court laid down a challenge for Missouri and 27 other states with mandatory life sentences with no parole for some juveniles convicted of first-degree murder. Adjustments will have to be made to sentencing laws.

The court reiterated earlier decisions, noting "youth is more than a chronological fact. It is a time of immaturity, irresponsibility, impetuousness and recklessness."

No argument there.

But the research also shows that young people, because they aren't fully formed yet, exhibit a great capacity to change.

That's an opportunity. Missouri has long applied some of the same research as it works with the 2,200 juveniles who enter Division of Youth Services each year.

Changes began in the early 1980s, but Missouri is known for gearing its approach more toward treatment than punishment. The result: In Missouri, juvenile offenders have far lower recidivism rates than in other states.

The court didn't outright ban juveniles convicted of first-degree murder from receiving mandatory sentences of life without parole. And the ruling shouldn't be misunderstood to mean that anyone is going to be freed from prison.

Missouri has 84 people who were sentenced under such mandatory laws. Some are now well into middle age.

The court specifically noted that "appropriate occasions for sentencing juveniles to this harshest penalty will be uncommon." Nationally, there are 2,570 such inmates.

Briefs filed in the case showed just how difficult it is to determine a youth's potential for violence as an adult,

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based on childhood behavior. One study found that most juveniles labeled as psychopaths wouldn't fit the description by adulthood.

And once the developmental state of juveniles is considered, every aspect of their interaction with criminal justice needs to be reexamined; from their ability to understand plea deals, to how they deal with police and prosecutors and their inability to assist defense attorneys.

That's why experts are saying this U.S. Supreme Court ruling will reverberate for years. And Missouri is ahead of the game.

To reach Mary Sanchez call 816-234-4752 or email msanchez@kcstar.com.

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Cemetaries are full of people who would disagree if they could.....

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Its not your fault if you are a minority...

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southtown

What bs. Before I teen years I KNEW it was wrong and illegal to kill, steal, rape..... This is legal bs to enforce what has become one of the mainstays of our society..."IT'S NOT MY FAULT"!

2 hours ago 2 Likes Report Abuse

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palooka62

As the courts continue to minimize public punishment for horrible crimes, private vengeance will become more likely as a substitute.

3 hours ago 2 Likes Report Abuse

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Glasshunter , Incorrigible. Or so I'm told.



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Mary, what's your take on the kid that raped the girl at the Raytown middle school?

I say no second chance for him. He knew damn well what he was doing was wrong.

Oh sure, if a 16 year old kid gets caught shoplifting, I'm all for ONE more chance. That's it.

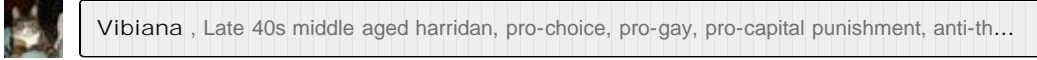
But I rank rape right up there with murder on the intensity scale, so no second chance for either.

"But the research also shows that young people, because they aren't fully formed yet, exhibit a great capacity to change."

I have a gut feeling the kid that raped that girl wont change, based on the nature of his crime. I think he's already ruined.

3 hours ago 2 Likes Report Abuse

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Vibiana , Late 40s middle aged harridan, pro-choice, pro-gay, pro-capital punishment, anti-th...

Sorry, Mary, if you were talking about Jean Valjean stealing a loaf of bread it would be one thing. These kids KILLED PEOPLE. You don't get a do-over when you've ended someone else's life.

4 hours ago 6 Likes Report Abuse

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Barfolo

Good Valjean comparison--no do-overs on murder.

I think that's why there are so many repeat homicide offenders--we didn't execute or incarcerate them enough the first time they murdered someone.

3 hours ago in reply to Vibiana 2 Likes Report Abuse

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SouthsideDave

Their victims deserved a chance too, but that was taken away from them.

7 hours ago 7 Likes Report Abuse

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gembull

One of the the cases she is referring to is that of the teen, a Afican American, that stalked and shot a Mr. Osborne, off his bike on his way to work. The teen recieved 10 years. This is ridiculous. This in a state where the average drug crime nets you the same sentence. Can you imagine if Mr. Osborne had been black, and the two youths were white? Al Sharpton would still be in town.

13 hours ago 11 Likes Report Abuse

Like Reply



lkjh

sad but true, just like the White boy who got fueled and then burned by the black kid(s), by the way whatever happened to that case, let that be the other way around.

13 hours ago in reply to gembull 6 Likes Report Abuse

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