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A Shameful Record

The United States leads the world in a shameful category: the number of people it has locked up for life without parole for crimes committed by juveniles. Juvenile crime should not be taken lightly, but young people should not be completely written off.

According to Human Rights Watch, 2,380 people in this country are serving life sentences for crimes they committed before they turned 18. That makes the United States an extreme global outlier. Sentencing juveniles to life without parole is at odds with international law; the vast majority of the world's countries ban the practice.

Some juvenile criminals commit horrible crimes, and the justice system should punish them accordingly. Juveniles, though, are not adults. Even their brain development is different, making them less able than older people to resist impulses. Consideration should also be given to the nature of the crime. In some cases, juveniles have been imprisoned for life for acting as accessories or lookouts for adults. Putting a 16-year-old who played such a role in jail for perhaps 65 years is an extraordi-

narily harsh, and expensive, societal response.

There are ongoing efforts in several states to impose sorely needed balance to the law. In California, the Legislature recently failed to act on a bill that would have allowed the more than 225 inmates serving life sentences there for crimes committed as minors the right to appear before a parole board after serving 25 years in prison. The bill deserves to be reintroduced, and to pass.

California is hardly the only state that needs to rethink its approach. As many as 38 states sentence minors to life without the chance of parole, including Pennsylvania, the worst offender, where hundreds of inmates — estimates range from 360 to 433 — have no hope of ever being released because of crimes they committed between the ages of 13 and 18.

There are now more than 2 million people behind bars in the United States. Locking up juveniles for life without parole is unfair and a poor use of criminal justice resources. California, and the other states, should rethink this misguided policy.