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## Court right to restrict juvenile life sentences

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The U.S. Supreme Court took a modest but important stand against cruel and unusual punishment Monday by ruling that juveniles who commit crimes that do not result in a death cannot be sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole.



As Justice Anthony Kennedy noted in the 5-4 ruling, the notion of locking away a juvenile for life without any opportunity for rehabilitation or reconsideration has been "rejected the world over" - with the exception of the United States, and perhaps Israel.

This ruling was much narrower than it should have been. Only four California inmates serving terms of life without parole were sentenced as juveniles in non-homicide cases.

More than 250 California inmates were sentenced as juveniles to life without parole for crimes involving a killing. In slightly more than half of those cases, the juvenile pulled the trigger or was otherwise the direct assailant. Almost as often, the juvenile was convicted of murder for being a knowing accomplice or participating in a robbery or other crime in which a life was taken by someone else.

State Sen. Leland Yee, a San Francisco Democrat and child psychologist, has been pushing for sensible legislation that would at least require a reassessment of life sentences issued to juveniles. Under his SB399, a juvenile sentenced to life without parole could ask for court review after serving 10 years. The court would have the discretion to reduce the sentence to 25 years to life - with the possibility of parole after 15 years.

Yee's bill is anything but soft on crime. It would still give the courts the ability to lock up juvenile offenders who commit heinous crimes for extended periods - and they could remain there for life if they show insufficient evidence of redemption.

SB399 has cleared the Senate and awaits action in the Assembly Appropriations Committee. Legislators should send it to Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger for his signature.

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