

Our views: Cruel and unusual (May 19)

Supreme Court ruling on teen sentencing a victory for fairness

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The U.S. Supreme Court ruled Monday that teenagers cannot be sentenced to life without parole for crimes other than murder, wisely ending the practice of condemning children to die in prison with no hope of release.

Writing for the majority in the 6-3 decision, Justice Anthony Kennedy correctly argued that irrevocable life sentences for such juveniles should be banned because evolving standards of decency have led to a national consensus such punishment is cruel and unusual.

The ruling is also “more in line with what we know about the development of the human brain and its ability to control impulses and violent behavior,” says Chief Assistant Brevard Public Defender Randy Moore of the 18th Circuit Public Defenders Office.

Research has shown the teen brain is not fully mature and that young offenders have a strong amenability to be rehabilitated.

Though the sentences are rare, the decision will have a profound and positive impact on Florida’s justice system. The case decided Monday involved a Jacksonville man who at age 17 committed a home robbery while on probation for a previous robbery at a restaurant.

And of the 129 juveniles offenders serving life without parole for nonhomicide crimes nationwide, 77 were sentenced in Florida, a dubious record.

The high court’s ruling is not a guarantee that teens serving life sentences for noncapital crimes will win release, and shouldn’t be. Those guilty of the most heinous crimes deserve to be locked up for good.

But it allows others the chance to prove they can change and earn a second shot at a productive life. That’s a victory for fairness.

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