



May 20, 2010

## Holding out hope

### Court rules youth not beyond redemption

Given the heinous nature of some crimes committed by juveniles, it's tempting to want to lock them up and throw away the key.

But such a visceral reaction fails to recognize that young offenders, no matter how abhorrent their behavior, lack the ability to fully realize the consequences of their actions.

That does not mean their misdeeds should go unpunished, but it does mean that consideration should be given to their still-developing thought processes and the fact that they lack mature judgment.

Thus the U.S. Supreme Court on Monday declared that juvenile offenders cannot be locked up with no chance of parole for crimes other than murder. The ruling follows the court's decision five years ago making the death penalty off-limits for juveniles.

The justices ruled 5-4 Monday that young criminals still might spend the rest of their lives in prison, but at least at some point they will have an opportunity to redeem themselves and perhaps be released.

That is as it should be. Our justice system should not abandon all hope for offenders under the age of 18. We must provide some chance that a young person can turn his or her life around despite having committed a terrible crime as a juvenile.

Courts in recent years have handed down increasingly harsh penalties for juvenile offenders. Yet the state with the lowest rate of juvenile repeat offenders in the nation, Missouri, has taken a different approach from simply putting young people behind bars.

The Missouri model houses delinquent youths in small residential settings, providing intense peer and professional counseling. Offenders are placed in facilities near their communities, where ties to family can be maintained, and physical restraint is used sparingly. Emphasis is placed on keeping the young people engaged in productive group activities rather than punishment.

The relatively low recidivism rate of juveniles who go through the Missouri program attests to its effectiveness.

But beyond humanitarian reasons for providing young offenders with a second chance, such programs, while not cheap, make long-term economic sense by keeping prison populations down.

Michigan and most other states are being squeezed by escalating corrections costs. If ways can be found to deter juveniles from becoming career criminals, society will reap huge dividends down the road.