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High court ruling offers teens hope

When 17-year-old Terrance Graham was locked up in a Florida prison five years ago for his role in a string of violent armed robberies, state officials might as well have thrown away the key.

No amount of good behavior or rehabilitation could have given the teenager a second chance: His punishment was life in prison without the chance of parole.

But all that changed last week, for Graham and thousands like him, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that sentencing juveniles to life in prison without parole is unconstitutional when the crime is not murder.

We couldn't agree more with the court's decision. It's inconceivable that someone who is considered a child by legal standards should be barred from ever proving he or she can become a valuable member of society – particularly when the life sentence is imposed due to a technicality or "three strikes" law, as is often the case.

Graham, now 22, took his case to the Supreme Court seeking at least a chance to go before the parole board at some point. The court heard arguments in the case in November and handed down its ruling May 17.

The 6-3 decision concluded that life in prison without the chance of parole is cruel and unusual punishment, and is not justified for teen offenders who may lack full "culpability" for their crimes because of their age.

"A state need not guarantee the offender eventual release, but if it imposes a sentence of life it must provide him or her with some realistic opportunity to obtain release before the end of that term," Justice Anthony Kennedy wrote.

This is where the Supreme Court really got it right. Maybe it's not possible to rehabilitate all juvenile offenders, but it is wrong to refuse them the opportunity. Particularly with child offenders, the goal of the justice system should be to turn their lives around, not to give up on them altogether.

Nationwide, about 2,225 juveniles have been sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole, the vast majority of them in Florida, according to the Equal Justice Initiative, a nonprofit that provides free legal representation to defendants and inmates it believes have been denied fair treatment.

Disturbingly, at least 70 of those juveniles were only 13 or 14 when they were sentenced to life without parole, according to a study conducted by Equal Justice. Most of the sentences were mandatory, meaning the court could not give any consideration to the child's age or life history, the nonprofit found.

Take Joe Sullivan, for example. He was sentenced to life in a Florida prison without parole for raping an elderly woman when he was 13.

The high court also heard his case but dismissed it, meaning a lower court is free to take it up applying the cruel and unusual punishment standard set by last week's ruling. He, too, could eventually be eligible for parole under the ruling.

Our support for the Supreme Court decision is in no way meant to minimize the severity of crimes committed by teenagers who have been sentenced to life without parole. Many of the crimes were heinous, and some of the offenders probably should spend life in prison.

But all of them?

Our justice system has failed if we just assume there is no hope for more than 2,000 people in this country who made terrible, life-changing decisions before they were legally able to vote, live on their own, drive a car, or in some cases, before they had the chance to graduate the eighth grade.

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