



OUR VIEW: The U.S. Supreme Court got it right in ruling that juveniles should not be sentenced to life in prison without parole for crimes that don't involve murder

By Birmingham News editorial board

June 04, 2010, 5:40AM

Teenagers can be a lot of bad things: Moody. Impulsive. Bull-headed. They can also make awful choices and do terrible things that hurt themselves and hurt others. But they aren't adults, and the law generally does not treat them as if they are.



Hence, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled recently that juveniles who haven't killed anyone cannot be locked up in prison forever with no chance for parole.

"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 the term," Justice Anthony Kennedy wrote in the 5-4 decision.

The decision affects more than 100 juveniles nationwide who are serving life-without-parole sentences for crimes other than murder. Almost 70 percent of those affected are in Florida.

While none of the cases comes from Alabama, one was argued by Alabama's Bryan Stevenson, representing a Florida inmate sentenced to life without parole at age 13 for sexual assault.

In a statement after the court ruled on one of the companion cases, Stevenson called the outcome "a significant victory."

"The court recognized that it is cruel to pass a final judgment on children, who have an enormous capacity for change and rehabilitation compared to adults," said Stevenson, the executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery.

The court's ruling does not grant Stevenson's client or any other juvenile automatic release from prison. What it does is offer them hope for freedom and, hopefully, an incentive to turn their lives around.

Stevenson remains hopeful the ruling will eventually have some impact on a number of juveniles who were sentenced to life without parole in homicide cases, including a number in Alabama. (A report last year from the Sentencing Project found that Alabama ranks first in the country for locking up black juveniles for life.)

Maybe some of these young offenders should remain behind bars the rest of their lives. But there is a price to pay for locking in a sentence without making room for second chances. That's especially true for young people who commit crimes before they can be held fully legally responsible and before they have reached full maturity.

There's a reason, remember, that juveniles can't buy cigarettes or vote.

Because teenagers are not adults, many professional groups have joined the call for courts to rein in some of the harshest punishments. The Supreme Court ruled in 2005 that inmates could not be sentenced to die for crimes committed before age 18.

Now, the court has said crimes other than murder shouldn't condemn juveniles to die in prison, either. Instead of life with no chance for parole, these inmates now have a chance for a life beyond prison.

In our view, that's a good thing for them, and for the rest of us, too.

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