



KIDS BEHIND BARS, FOR LIFE

PA. LEADS IN HARSH SENTENCES FOR CHILDREN

THE PHOTOS can rip your heart out: pictures of children, the soft features of babyhood still lingering in their faces, dressed in prison jumpsuits, living the rest of their lives behind bars.

The images were taken not in some backward country, but here the United States. A sobering report released last week by the Equal Justice Initiative shows that more than 2,225 children age 17 and younger in the United States have been sentenced to life in prison without parole.

Of that number, 73 were 13 and 14 when sentenced. And these young people are serving sentences in just 19 states.

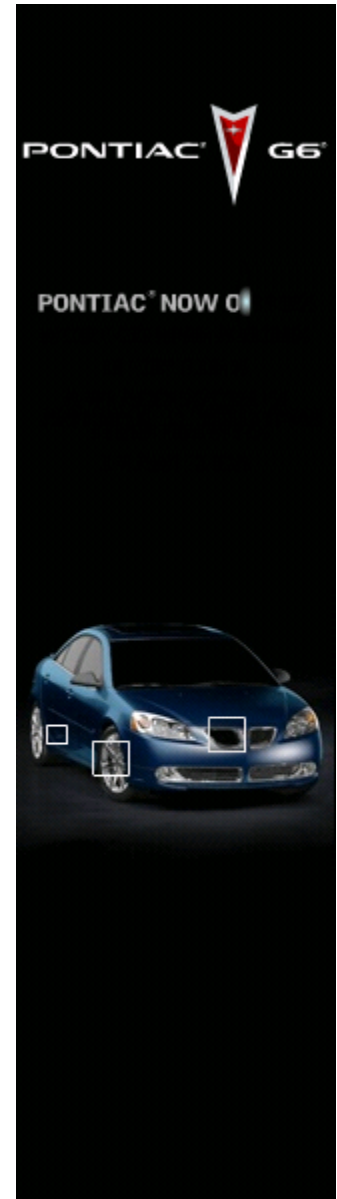
Even more sobering: The state with the highest number of 13- and 14-year-olds sentenced to life in prison - a total of 18 - is Pennsylvania.

The Equal Justice Initiative is a nonprofit group that represents poor prisoners and those they believe received unfair treatment. The group considers sentencing 13- and 14-year-olds cruel and unusual punishment, a violation of the Eighth Amendment and says it violates international law.

We agree. As the report points out, children tend to be incapable of making mature choices; they are vulnerable to negative influences, and powerless to protect themselves from dangerous home environments.

While these factors don't excuse crimes they may commit, they should absolutely influence the way we deal with the aftermath of those crimes.

Pennsylvania has been doling out this extreme punishment for decades, which explains why it ranks No. 1 on the list. Bryan A. Stevenson, the initiative's executive director, said many of the cases date from the 1960s and '70s, but most states that are imprisoning young offenders for life didn't start to do so until the '80s.



The Equal Justice Initiative report supports a similar report and findings by Human Rights Watch released in 2005.

Not surprisingly, young lifers share the same characteristics as incarcerated adults. Poverty plays a significant role in their backgrounds. So does race. Nearly half the 73 young offenders were black, 30 percent white, 9 percent Latino. Poor kids often get poor legal representation. In almost all of the cases, the young offender had been abused.

Reports such as this show the need for greater scrutiny of juvenile sentences, and more advocacy to keep young offenders from cruel and unusual punishment. *

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