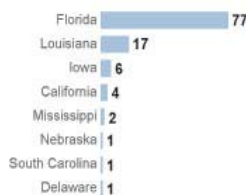


■ Debate

Our view on juvenile justice: Should a 13-year-old be locked away for life?

Make parole an option for children convicted of non-homicide crimes.



Doing time

Of the 109 people in prison for life without parole in non-homicide crimes they committed as juveniles, 86% are in two states. Number of prisoners by state:

Source: Florida State University's Public Interest Law Center and College of Social Sciences. Includes data from 47 states.

By Veronica Salazar, USA TODAY

Charles grew up in a Baltimore housing project where his ambition early on was to go to state prison and build a serious tough-guy rep. At 13 he was sent to reform school. At 17 he was found guilty of manslaughter for killing someone in a knife fight. Out on parole for that crime, he was caught with a handgun and went back to prison, where he punched a guard during a riot. You can imagine a judge looking at Charles and deciding to lock him up and throw away the key.

But during a long stretch in solitary, about the only thing Charles had to do was read the one book he'd been allowed to

bring — a collection of plays his girlfriend had given him. What happened next is a redemption tale that's no less stirring for being familiar: He started a prison drama program, got a GED, left prison, went to college and changed his life. Maybe you've seen actor and director Charles Dutton in the Fox TV series *Roc*, in films such as *A Time to Kill* or on Broadway, where he's been nominated for two Tony Awards.

Not every juvenile offender can evolve this way, but there are enough such stories to make us wary of state laws that allow judges to lock up kids as young as 13 in prison for the rest of their lives, with no chance of parole. (Of the 109 people in prison for life without parole for non-homicide crimes they committed before age 18, the vast majority are from Florida, which aggressively toughened its laws in the 1990s in response to a surge in juvenile crime.) Two such offenders, one 13 at the time he raped a 72-year-old woman and the other 17 when he staged a home invasion robbery, have appealed their sentences of life without parole all the way to the Supreme Court, which heard arguments in the cases Monday.

The court — which in 2005 abolished the death penalty for juveniles — seemed sharply split. Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg said that "because of immaturity, you can't really judge a teenager at the point of sentencing." But Chief Justice John Roberts and Justices Antonin Scalia and Samuel Alito seemed skeptical about declaring such sentences unconstitutionally cruel and unusual.

To be sure, these kids aren't sympathetic figures. Many are violent, remorseless predators. Some might never be anything but dangerous psychopaths. Others, however, might be able to change as they age. Medical literature describes how young brains haven't matured and how teenagers' impulse management and risk assessment are underdeveloped.

Unlike those who would outlaw life-without-parole for any offender below the age of 18, we support it as an option for the sorts of murders that merit a life sentence. Violent, repeat offenders who commit lesser crimes deserve long sentences, possibly even life in some circumstances. Parole boards can keep those who never evolve locked away from society, but the law should recognize that those who grow and mature should not be discarded for things they did when they were young and stupid.

One of those urging the Supreme Court to give juveniles a chance to leave prison is Alan Simpson, a self-described law-breaking "monster" as an adolescent who went on to become a U.S. senator from Wyoming.

Not every young criminal is a Dutton or a Simpson. But what a shame to waste the lives of those who could be.

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