

# The Miami Herald

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## Reconsider plight of juvenile 'lifers'

It was a remarkable coincidence. While the U.S. Supreme Court this week was considering whether teenage criminals deserve to be sentenced to life in prison without parole in cases that do not involve homicide, three South Florida teens were charged as adults for setting fire to another teenager.

The horrible suffering inflicted on 15-year-old Michael Brewer of Deerfield Beach represents one of the most abhorrent crimes South Florida has witnessed in a long time, which is saying a lot. Five teens acting in concert, according to the police, doused him with alcohol and set the boy aflame. The victim has managed to survive thus far, with burns over 65 percent of his body, but he remains in critical condition and his life will be changed forever.

### 'Cruel and unusual punishment'

This is precisely the kind of case that makes juries, prosecutors and judges want to "send a message" to other would-be criminals by imposing sentences severe enough to match the crime. The question before the Supreme Court is whether sentencing juveniles to life in prison without parole in such circumstances constitutes cruel and unusual punishment.

It is no coincidence that the cases before the court came from Florida, because this state leads the nation in the number of criminals serving life sentences for crimes they committed while juveniles in which no one was killed. Out of 106 such prisoners, 77 are in Florida. This is not something to be proud of.

Instead, argued the attorneys who want the court to ban such sentences, it is something to be ashamed of. The lopsided numbers indicate widespread repudiation of such sentences elsewhere.

Further, they argued, the immature and "transient" nature of adolescence makes it impossible to determine at such an early age who should be deemed unredeemably incorrigible and thrown into a jail cell forever.

### Opportunity for change

In support of this view, former U.S. Sen. Alan Simpson of Wyoming filed a brief saying teen criminals deserve a chance of freedom. He was involved in arson and other serious crimes as a teen before making a better life for himself. He may be an exception, but his life would have been wasted in prison without the opportunity provided by parole.

The answer may be to allow for some sort of mandatory parole hearing at a later stage in life. Even Charles Manson, the iconic incarnation of evil, gets a chance to plead his case occasionally, although he's been denied 11 times by the parole board in California.

A parole hearing is not a get-out-of-jail card, but rather an opportunity to show that the prisoner has been rehabilitated. Horrible crimes deserve serious time -- but adolescents deserve a second chance at life beyond prison walls.

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