

A Death Sentence

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America is the only country that sentences juveniles to life in prison without the possibility of parole. This is despite research showing that an individual's brain does not fully develop until their mid to late 20's, meaning that rational or critical thinking is not fully developed before the age of eighteen, the nationally recognized age of adulthood in the United States. This development also heavily relies on the environment and education an individual receives in adolescence. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, some teens respond to stress differently. So with the knowledge of this research, why does the court system still give them a death sentence, essentially? That is basically what life in prison without the possibility of parole is, yes? Sure, they are not facing the lethal injection, or other forms of capital punishment and given an execution date but they will never be released back into society. It was only in 2005, two decades ago, that the United States Supreme Court ruled that it goes against the Eighth Amendment to receive capital punishment if you are under the age of 18. But in many states, an individual can still serve a life sentence without the possibility of parole.

From our textbook, *Juvenile Justice* by Whitehead and Lab, one of the least effective data sources would be the outdated Summary Reporting System (SRS) which consisted of the Index, the Part I offenses, to the other Part II offenses. Part I offenses include murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny, motor vehicle theft, and arson whereas Part II offenses are often status offenses. Which means that they are offenses, in the case of a juvenile, more than likely geared towards the age of the offender like curfew violations. This data source is outdated and has now been replaced after researchers found the problematic focus on Part I crimes. The most useful tool from the textbook to better understand my question is the system that evolved from the SRS system of two part offenses into the National Incident-Based Reporting System

(NIBRS) which groups offenses in three categories. The categories are split up to consist of crimes against persons, crimes against property, and the final section crimes against society. An upgrade to the data collected through the NIBRS from the previously used SRS, is the increase of criminal offenses counted. The NIBRS counts up to 10, per criminal incident and added 50 more data elements that SRS had not. Overall, the NIBRS is more extensive in the information that it collects and stores enabling law enforcement and researchers to gain a better understanding of the crimes being committed and making informed decisions. (Whitehead & Lab 2022). The NIBRS would be beneficial because it has an increase of data elements collected for not only the victim and victim-offender relationship but also property loss, location of offense, presence of weapons, the number of victims, number of offenders and said offenders information. Information collected from the NIBRS can help researchers find the answer to my question, why is the United States still sentencing juveniles to life in prison without parole before they can even make rational or reasonable choices. A death sentence all in of itself.

References

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