

## When it's wrong to throw away the key

A Times Editorial

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In banning the execution of juveniles, the U.S. Supreme Court in 2005 described that group as "categorically less culpable than the average criminal." Applying that general principle to other criminal sanctions, how is it that a 14-year-old who neither killed nor injured anyone could be serving his entire life in a Florida prison?

The case of Kenneth Young, who is now 22 and a model inmate, speaks to the brittle nature of Florida's criminal justice system and why it can stand a few ounces of common sense. Unfortunately, the Legislature has yet to provide any.

Young's father died before he was born, and his crack-addicted mother left him before he went along for the ride in a robbery spree in June 2000. His job was to grab the cash while his older mentor, a crack dealer with a rap sheet, held a gun on hotel and store clerks. For his efforts, Young was treated to the same sentence, life without parole, as the older man who held the gun.

That Young deserved tough treatment is without dispute. But life in prison for a 14-year-old who hurt no one? Has the state simply given up on any possibility that teenagers might one day turn their lives around?

A group of Florida State University law students is hoping to persuade the Legislature this year to provide some possibility of parole for at least some of the 122 inmates now serving life in prison for crimes committed while they were juveniles. One of them, a former corrections officer named Donna Duncan, visited Young and was impressed.

"You see inmates like Kenneth Young, who come in as children, and you know the adult prisoners eat them alive," Duncan told the Times. "But they manage - miraculously - to develop into sincere, decent people. This bill is for them."

Victor Crist, a Tampa state senator who heads the Criminal and Civil Justice Appropriations Committee, is in a position to help the cause of the so-called Children in Prison Rehabilitation Act. The proposal would strictly limit the provision of parole by the type of crime and the degree of rehabilitation, and the Florida Parole Commission provides a practical reason for support. If the offender is not dangerous and has demonstrated genuine rehabilitation, why should the public keep paying for a lifetime's worth of room and board?

Not every juvenile will deserve a second chance, but the proposed bill would at least provide the possibility. It deserves the support of Sen. Crist and the Legislature.