Life without parole unfair to juveniles? [1]

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For being a traitorous friend, Stacey Torrance was thrown into jail for life.

Torrance was just 14 when an older cousin convinced him in 1988 to lure a rich kid to a North Philadelphia corner, where the cousin and an accomplice kidnapped and later shot and strangled him.

Torrance didn't kill 16-year-old Alexander Porter and insisted he never knew of his cousin's murderous intent. But 20 years later, he sits in a state prison in Chester, with no prospect for parole or eventual freedom.

Such cases concern lawmakers like state Sen. Stewart Greenleaf, R-Montco-Bucks, who said he began to question the system's fairness when he learned that Pennsylvania leads the nation in the number of juveniles sentenced to life in prison without parole.

Greenleaf will convene a public hearing on Sept. 22 in Harrisburg to examine whether legislative relief is warranted.

"The purpose of this fact-finding session is to hear the experts in regards to what's going on and make sure there's no injustice being done," Greenleaf said.

Pennsylvania has 444 people serving life-without-parole sentences for crimes they committed as juveniles, according to Human Rights Watch. Nationally, 2,484 lifers are behind bars for crimes they committed as juveniles. No youth outside the United States are serving such sentences, said Alison Parker, deputy director of the group's U.S. program.

Pennsylvania also has the dubious distinction of ranking second nationally, behind Connecticut, in the racial disparity of juveniles sentenced to life without parole, Parker wrote in a report she released in May. In Pennsylvania, she said, black juveniles are 1.5 times more likely to be sentenced to life without parole as white youth, despite commensurate crimes.

Hearings like Greenleaf's are crucial to reforming the system, Parker said.

"We're absolutely supportive of any moves by legislators both at the state and the federal level to eliminate the sentence of life without parole for children," said Parker, who has studied the issue since 2005. "The sentence violates human rights; it's unjust and inappropriate for a child."

Some experts strongly disagree.
"We don't think it needs reform; [life without parole] is only applied in the most serious cases," said Christopher Mallios, assistant chief of District Attorney Lynne Abraham's legislation unit. "It's used because of the horrible nature of the crime, [when the defendant has] an extensive record as a juvenile and there's a finding that they're no longer amenable to treatment in the juvenile system."

Mallios, an assistant district attorney, said his office likely will participate in Greenleaf's public hearing.

The issue is landing on more states' legislative agendas.

Lawmakers in California, Florida, Illinois, Louisiana, Michigan and Nebraska have considered providing parole relief for juvenile lifers, Parker said. Colorado in 2006 became the only state to pass legislation eliminating life-without-parole sentences for juveniles, she said.

"The idea is simply to give them access to a parole hearing, which is not a guarantee of release," Parker said. "It's not: 'Let's throw open the jail doors and let out dangerous people.' It's simply: 'Grant them a hearing.'"

At least one federal lawmaker also has moved to make early release possible for juvenile lifers.

Rep. Robert C. Scott of Virginia last December introduced the Juvenile Justice Accountability and Improvement Act, a bill that would require that juveniles get at least one parole hearing during the first 15 years of their life sentence, followed by at least one parole hearing every three years thereafter.

That bill was referred to a crime subcommittee in January.

Experts say Pennsylvania's top ranking results from tough state laws such as charging murder suspects as adults regardless of their age.

Some prosecutors argue that some kids commit such heinous crimes that they deserve to lose their freedom for good. But civil-rights activists say life-without-parole sentences are unfair for young people who are impaired by poor judgment and have a chance of being rehabilitated. *

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