

Age doesn't matter when punishing certain crimes

Devin Rokyta/Moscow-Pullman Daily News

Life sentences are usually reserved for - and should be reserved for - the worst of the worst, the serial rapists and murderers of the world.

When a life sentence is handed down, few would argue the severity and finality of the penalty isn't appropriate given the heinous nature of the crimes committed.

But what about when that offender, that murderer, is a 14-year-old boy? Is a life sentence just?

A jury in Kootenai County will likely be facing that question soon in the case of Eldon Gale Samuel III, who is charged with two counts of first-degree murder and will be tried as an adult for the March 24 deaths of his father and 13-year-old brother.

He could receive life in prison without parole, the same sentence given to four other Idaho youths previously convicted as adults for murder. Those youths ranged in ages 16-17 at the time of their crimes.

Ada County District Judge Cheri Copsy, who imposed a fixed life sentence against one of those four, a 17-year-old accused of killing his mother in her bedroom, said the case was the most difficult she ever had. She determined, though, the sentence was appropriate given the "brutal" and "heinous" nature of the murder.

"Fixed life is - it is one of the harshest sentences that we can hand down and it's reserved only for those offenses that are so egregious that it demands an exceptionally high measure of retribution, or that the evidence indicates that the offender cannot successfully be monitored in society to reduce the risk to those who come in contact with him, and that imprisonment until death is the only way to ensure that we are protecting society," Copsy said.

Then there's the other side.

Idaho State Appellate Public Defender Sara Thomas worked on appeal cases for two of the Idaho youths serving life without parole for murder. She lamented the teens grow up and change, becoming different people.

"When you write these kids off like that, you're making the presumption that they can never safely live in society," she said. "When you're dealing with a child, that's a pretty big presumption to make."

With that we agree. However, judges don't hand down life sentences lightly and without much deliberation. For the benefit of society, perpetrators of the most vile crimes, youth included, should be locked up for good, because it's also a big presumption to make they can be rehabilitated.

