

Name: _____ Class: _____

Remember the Victims of Juvenile Offenders

By Jennifer Bishop-Jenkins
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Jennifer Bishop-Jenkins' sister and her sister's husband were murdered by a 16-year-old. In this informational text, Bishop-Jenkins discusses juvenile justice and how young offenders should be sentenced for their crimes. As you read, take notes on what the author says about how various juvenile offenders should be treated for their crimes.

- [1] When my pregnant 25-year-old sister and her husband were murdered by a 16-year-old, she left a last inspiring message of love in her own blood that transformed my life. The teenager who killed my sister's family was born of privilege in the Chicago suburbs. He planned the crime for weeks and executed it alone. He had committed crimes before, but never faced serious consequences. His parents always bailed him out, never wanting him to get in real trouble. If only he had gotten in trouble the first time that he shot out people's car windows with his BB rifle, or when he was accused of setting that girl's sweater on fire in school, or any of his other serious early crimes. But he never faced legal consequences, so he kept going because, he told his friends, it gave him a "rush."



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Most young people who commit crimes appropriately stay in the juvenile justice system which is focused on rehabilitation. But there are rare cases when older teens demonstrate heinousness¹ and culpability² and carry out truly horrific crimes. For those few a couple years of detention and programs are not enough. These individuals can be appropriately tried as adults. They need to grow older before release. They need long term evaluation to see if they will ever be able to rejoin society. And we should not rule out a sentence of life without parole³ in extreme cases. We must balance the victims' families' right to some legal finality with the likelihood that the offender will ever qualify for release. It's a sad fact that some sociopaths⁴ start young and remain dangerous all their lives.

As a volunteer with the Cook County juvenile probation program for more than a decade sharing my sister's story with youthful offenders, I am always emotional when I talk to them about how their getting in trouble is a good thing. It means they get a chance to learn from their mistakes. Consequences are good. They help young people change and grow. They have been given a chance that I'd give anything for my sister's killer to have had before his crimes escalated. It always inspires me how many young people actually get this.

1. **Heinous (adjective):** utterly wicked or evil
2. **Culpability (noun):** responsibility for a fault or wrong
3. the release of a prisoner temporarily or permanently before the completion of their sentence
4. a person with a personality disorder, which results in having little to no conscience

Cases vary widely and so all must be judged individually. Sentencing has to focus not only on the offender but also on public safety and prevention of further victimization. Our society is appropriately concerned, as this forum demonstrates, with helping juveniles. Let's also remember that the victims of violent juvenile crime need just as much of our support.

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