



Iowa General Assembly

2014 Legal Updates

Legislative Services Agency – Legal Services Division

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Purpose. *Legal update briefings are prepared by the nonpartisan Legal Services Division of the Legislative Services Agency. A legal update briefing is intended to inform legislators, legislative staff, and other persons interested in legislative matters of recent court decisions, Attorney General Opinions, regulatory actions, federal actions, and other occurrences of a legal nature that may be pertinent to the General Assembly's consideration of a topic. Although a briefing may identify issues for consideration by the General Assembly, a briefing should not be interpreted as advocating any particular course of action.*

JUVENILE MANDATORY MINIMUM SENTENCES

Filed by the Iowa Supreme Court

July 18, 2014

State v. Lyle

No. 11-1339

http://www.iowacourts.gov/About_the_Courts/Supreme_Court/Supreme_Court_Opinions/Recent_Opinions/20140718/11-1339.pdf

Factual Background. A juvenile was involved in a brief altercation with a student outside of a high school. The juvenile allegedly had purchased \$5 of marijuana from the student and the student refused to deliver the marijuana to the juvenile. Subsequently, the juvenile and another companion punched the student for failing to deliver the marijuana and took a small bag of marijuana from the student. At the time of the commission of the crime, the juvenile was 17 years of age and was enrolled in high school.

Procedural Background. The juvenile was prosecuted as an adult and convicted of robbery in the second degree and sentenced to a mandatory minimum term of 7 years in prison with a maximum term of confinement of 10 years.

During the sentencing hearing, the juvenile objected to the mandatory minimum sentence and argued the mandatory minimum sentence was unconstitutional as applied. The court overruled the objection and sentenced the juvenile to the mandatory sentence. The juvenile appealed and the Iowa Supreme Court transferred the appeal to the Court of Appeals. The Court of Appeals affirmed the mandatory minimum sentence as applied to the juvenile and the juvenile sought further review with the Iowa Supreme Court (Court).

Issue. Whether the prohibition of cruel and unusual punishment in the Iowa Constitution permits a statutory scheme that mandates a person sentenced for a crime committed as a juvenile to serve a mandatory minimum period of confinement prior to becoming eligible for parole or work release?

Majority Opinion. There were multiple opinions issued in the case but the four-justice majority concluded that a mandatory minimum sentence of imprisonment for a juvenile is too punitive based upon what society knows about juvenile behavior. Additionally, the Court emphasized that this conclusion is consistent with a consensus of a majority of Iowans. The majority of the Court outlined a two-step inquiry in this case.

Societal Standards. The Court's inquiry first considered societal standards as expressed in legislative enactments and state practices to determine whether there is a national consensus against mandatory minimum sentences for juveniles. The majority acknowledged that no other court in the country has held that a statutory scheme that prescribes a mandatory minimum sentence for juveniles is unconstitutional. However, the Court concluded that constitutional protections for the rights of juveniles in sentencing is rapidly evolving. The Court further stated the Iowa Legislature signaled its independent concern with mandatory prison sentences for juveniles during the 2013 Legislative Session by allowing a judge to suspend a mandatory minimum sentence for a juvenile except for a juvenile classified as a youthful offender or a class "A" felon. Numerous Iowa statutes prohibit juveniles from engaging in risky behavior because of the reduced capacity juveniles have for good decision-making. These statutes include prohibitions on underage drinking and tobacco consumption, and restrictions on operating a motor vehicle. Furthermore, the Court stated that numerous Iowa Code provisions require the Court to take into account the "best interests of the child" when making a decision about a juvenile. Based upon this legislative history, the Court concluded that there is a societal consensus that a juvenile lacks the risk-calculation skills adults are presumed to possess and the "best interests of the child" generally includes using discretion when dealing with juveniles. A mandatory minimum sentencing scheme does not account for the consensus that a juvenile lacks the risk-calculating skills adults are presumed to possess and does not permit the Court to use

discretion to determine what is in the best interest of the juvenile.

Cruel and Unusual Punishment Clause. The Court's second inquiry was guided by the standards elaborated in controlling precedents and applied the Court's own understanding and interpretation of the Iowa Constitution's text, history, meaning, and purpose to determine if a mandatory minimum sentence violates the Cruel and Unusual Punishment Clause of the Iowa Constitution. The Court emphasized that, as juvenile sentencing has become more punitive, more rights have been given to juveniles. In federal court rulings, juveniles under 16 years of age and then juveniles under 18 years of age were declared not to be subject to the death penalty. Nonhomicidal juvenile life-without-parole sentences were barred by the United States Supreme Court even when 37 states had statutory schemes permitting such types of sentences. Recently, the United States Supreme Court struck down all juvenile life-without-parole sentences including sentences involving a homicide. Also recently, the Iowa Supreme Court has struck down juvenile sentences that have a parole component, but in practice are the equivalent of a life sentence without parole.

The Court, while acknowledging the progression of recent case law, as required under the constitutional test, concluded that the sentencing of juveniles with statutorily required mandatory minimums does not adequately serve the legitimate penological objectives in light of a juvenile's categorically diminished culpability and thus violates the Cruel and Unusual Punishment Clause of the Iowa Constitution. The Court specified that mandatory minimum sentencing results in cruel and unusual punishment because of the differences between juveniles and adults, but also acknowledged that the harm to a victim is not diluted by the age of the offender. The Court stated that serious crimes can at times be committed by conduct that appears less serious when the result of juvenile behavior, as illustrated by the facts in this case. If a juvenile has a greater capacity for growth and reform, it is likely that a juvenile can be rehabilitated faster if given the opportunity, and care should be taken to avoid an irrevocable judgment about the juvenile's value and place in society.

Holding. The Court held that a mandatory minimum sentence of imprisonment for a juvenile is unconstitutional under the Cruel and Unusual Punishment Clause in Article I, section 17 of the Iowa Constitution.

Impact of Ruling. The majority specified that the juvenile in this case must be resentenced so the district judge is able to at least consider a sentencing option other than imprisonment. Furthermore, the Court stated this case does not prohibit a judge from sentencing a juvenile to prison for the length of time identified by the legislature for the crime committed, nor does the case prohibit the Court from imposing a mandatory minimum period of confinement for a person classified as a youthful offender. The Court recognized that this case will apply to all juveniles serving a mandatory sentence of imprisonment, thus this case will require all juveniles who are in prison under a mandatory sentence to be returned to court for resentencing. The Court stated that even if the resentencing does not alter the sentence for most juveniles, or any juvenile, the action taken by a district judge in each resentencing case will honor the decency and humanity embedded in the Cruel and Unusual Punishment Clause of the Iowa Constitution. The Court also noted that this case has no application to sentencing laws affecting adult offenders.

Dissent by Three Justices. The dissent strenuously disagreed with the majority conclusion that sentencing juveniles according to statutorily required mandatory minimums, regardless of the length of the sentence, does not adequately serve legitimate penological objectives in light of the juvenile's categorically diminished culpability. The dissent stated there is simply no authority for this blanket proposition, and that this conclusion by the majority appears to squarely contravene the role of the legislature in devising appropriate sentencing schemes. Apart from the legislature limiting the use of mandatory minimum sentences under certain circumstances, the dissent stated that the majority opinion gives little weight to any strong national consensus opposing juvenile mandatory minimum sentences. Furthermore, the dissent noted that the majority gave deference to recent legislative judgments concerning juvenile sentencing but did not give deference to legislative judgments that were in effect when the juvenile was sentenced. It is true, the dissent acknowledged, the legislature's grant of discretion in some contexts may well reflect our society's judgment that juveniles are different, but it does not follow that juveniles must be treated differently in all contexts. Under recent cases the dissent noted that the convergence of the offender's age, harsh sentence, and mandatory sentencing scheme made the sentence cruel and unusual and thus unconstitutional. However, in this case the dissent stated that the juvenile's sentence was not harsh, cruel, or unusual because the juvenile's imprisonment will most likely end when the juvenile reaches 25 years of age.

Dissent by Justice Waterman. Justice Waterman joined the dissent but wrote a separate opinion and stated that our standards for cruel and unusual punishment under the Iowa Constitution should remain identical to the standards under the U.S. Constitution. The Justice noted that by holding a mandatory minimum sentence for a violent felony is cruel and unusual punishment and unconstitutional under the Iowa Constitution rather than under the U.S. Constitution allows the majority to evade review by the United States Supreme Court. The Justice also argued that judges do not have a monopoly on wisdom, legislators raise teenagers too, and courts traditionally give broad deference to legislative sentencing policy judgments. The dissent emphasized that if a court misinterprets a statute, the legislature can amend the statute the next session, but if the Court misinterprets our state constitution, the people are stuck with the decision unless the decision is overruled or the constitution is amended.

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