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New Report Finds Growing Support That Young People Ages 18, 19 and 20 Are Entitled to Increased Legal Protections in Death Penalty Cases

Washington, D.C. – In commemoration of the 20th anniversary of the United States Supreme Court's landmark decision ending the juvenile death penalty, the Death Penalty Information Center (DPI) today released a new report detailing growing support that young people ages 18, 19, and 20 should receive the same age appropriate considerations that juveniles now receive in death penalty cases.

The report, Immature Minds in a "Maturing Society": *Roper v. Simmons* at 20 is available at: https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/research/analysis/reports/in-depth/immature-minds-in-a-maturing-society

In *Roper v. Simmons* (2005), the Supreme Court found a societal consensus against the execution of juveniles who commit serious crimes, citing the many ways that teenagers under the age of 18 are treated differently in the eyes of the law and the neuroscience that distinguishes children from adults. DPI's new report notes that courts and legislatures are increasingly taking notice of similar evidence that supports extending the same legal protections to youth ages 18 to 20.

"This report confirms that there is very little evidence to justify a legal process that makes a teenager death-eligible on his 18th birthday, but not the day before," said Robin M. Maher, Executive Director of the Death Penalty Information Center.

Immature Minds in a "Maturing Society" confirms society's growing recognition that young people do not deserve the most severe criminal sentences. The data show that juries increasingly view youth as an important mitigating factor, with the number of new death sentences for young people ages 18 to 20 declining significantly over the last 20 years. Since 2020, juries have sentenced just five people age 20 or younger to death in only three states. The number of executions for this age group has also steadily declined: from 2005-2009, 49 people convicted of crimes committed as young people age 18 to 20 were executed, compared to just 19 between 2020 and 2024.

"The Supreme Court's decision to end the juvenile death penalty twenty years ago was an acknowledgement that the law must treat young people with immature brains differently than adults. Since that time, the scientific and medical research the Court relied upon has only grown stronger. It is now well established that adolescent brains continue to develop well after the age of 18, and there is growing recognition that young people ages 18, 19, and

20 should receive the same protection from harsh punishments that courts and legislatures provide to juveniles," said Ms. Maher.

The report also confirms the continuing role that race plays in how young people are judged in the criminal legal system. Since the *Roper* decision, more than three-quarters of death sentences given to young people aged 18 to 20 have been imposed on people of color. Racial disparities are also evident in the executions of people in this age group. Since *Roper*, young people of color aged 18 to 20 are twice as likely as white young people of the same age to be executed. People of color who are sentenced to death, on average, are almost five years younger than white defendants. Since *Roper*, Texas has executed half of all those who committed their crimes at age 20 or younger, and 80% of them were people of color.

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The **Death Penalty Information Center** (DPI) is a national non-profit organization whose mission is to serve the media, policymakers, and the general public with data and analysis on issues concerning capital punishment and the people it affects. DPI does not take a position on the death penalty itself but is critical of problems in its application.

Founded in 1990, DPI promotes insightful discourse on the death penalty by curating and presenting expansive, authoritative data from credible sources and offering clear, trustworthy, and timely information and research about the history and current application of the death penalty. DPI produces groundbreaking reports on issues such as arbitrariness, costs, innocence, and racial disparities. DPI also releases an annual year-end report highlighting significant developments and trends. A wide variety of free online resources are available on DPI's award-winning website, including searchable databases; data visualizations; educational curricula; and podcast series, 12:01: The Death Penalty in Context, which explores diverse viewpoints and experiences related to capital punishment.