



Lesson
Juvenile Justice in America: Sentencing Youth as Adults

OVERVIEW

In this lesson, students will practice writing, listening, discussion and research skills as they examine policies for sentencing juveniles in the United States.

Video clips provided with this lesson are from the film ***15 to Life: Kenneth's Story***, which follows a Florida man who received four life sentences at age 15 for a series of armed robberies. Imprisoned for more than a decade, he believed he would die behind bars. Now a U.S. Supreme Court decision could set him free.

OBJECTIVES

By the end of this lesson, students will:

- explore U.S. Supreme Court decisions regarding sentencing juveniles as adults
- debate the United States' policy of sentencing juvenile offenders, with a focus on sentencing in non-homicide cases
- discuss Kenneth Young's case in the context of current legislation
- examine the pros and cons of policies focusing on rehabilitation for juvenile offenders.

GRADE LEVELS

9-12

SUBJECT AREAS

Economics
Psychology
Sociology
U.S. Government and Politics

MATERIALS

- Internet access and equipment to show the class online video
- Copies of:
 - **“Life Without Parole Becomes 25 Years for Terrance Graham, Subject of U.S. Supreme Court Case”**
http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/2012-02-24/features/os-life-without-parole-terrance-graham-20120224-12_1_terrance-graham-resentencing-parole

- “About the United States Supreme Court Decision: *Graham v. Florida*” <http://fairsentencingofyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Fact-Sheet-on-the-Graham-Decision-FINAL2.pdf>

ESTIMATED TIME NEEDED

One 50-minute class period, plus 30 to 50 minutes for the optional homework assignment (and additional class time, if possible, for extension activities)

FILM CLIPS

Clip 1: “Kenneth’s Story” (8:22 min.)

The clip begins at 1:17 with the *15 to Life: Kenneth’s Story* title card, and Paolo Annino (Kenneth Young’s lawyer) discussing the particulars of Young’s case and the 2010 *Graham v. Florida* decision. The clip ends at 9:39 with George Steffen of the Pinellas County sheriff’s office assessing Young’s involvement in the robberies.

Clip 2: “Juvenile Justice and Rehabilitation” (6:51 min.)

The clip begins at 29:34 with juvenile incarceration statistics and Pinellas public defender Patrice Moore discussing Young’s case and some of the factors that lead to juveniles ending up in court. The clip includes interviews and court footage relating to Young’s case, life sentences and rehabilitation. The clip ends at 36:25 with Young discussing his life before he came to prison.

ACTIVITIES

1. *Graham v. Florida* U.S. Supreme Court Ruling

- Divide students into groups of three or four. Assign each group to read the following two articles. Students may take turns reading sections aloud or read silently to themselves:
 - “Life Without Parole Becomes 25 Years for Terrance Graham, Subject of U.S. Supreme Court Case” http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/2012-02-24/features/os-life-without-parole-terrance-graham-20120224-12_1_terrance-graham-resentencing-parole
 - “About the United States Supreme Court Decision: *Graham v. Florida*” <http://fairsentencingofyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Fact-Sheet-on-the-Graham-Decision-FINAL2.pdf>
- Invite each group to identify what it found to be the five most compelling pieces of information from the two articles and share those findings with the class.

Note: If students are not already familiar with the Eighth Amendment, it may be helpful to take a few minutes to review and discuss.

2. Kenneth Young's Story

Show **Clip 1**. Ask students to discuss the following:

- How does Young's case relate to Graham's case?

3. Sentencing Juvenile Offenders

Show **Clip 2**. Invite students to compare the experiences and statistics presented in the clip with highlights from *Graham v. Florida*. Ask students to describe their impressions of juvenile justice in America. Considering the articles they've read and what they know about Kenneth Young's story, have students answer the questions below. Consider each in relation to: the offender, his or her family, the victims and society in general.

- Should juveniles be sentenced as adults?
- Should juveniles have the opportunity to obtain release from prison in cases of non-homicide offenses? If so, at what point should their release be considered? What factors should be taken into account?
- What is a fair resentencing term for Kenneth Young?
- What are the pros and cons of offering rehabilitative opportunities to juvenile offenders in non-homicide cases?

OPTION: As a homework assignment, have students write short persuasive essays in response to the following question: *How should society handle juvenile offenders in non-homicide cases?*

EXTENSIONS

1. Examining Multiple Perspectives

Ask students to research articles and opinion pieces written by those in favor of and those opposing juvenile life sentences, including cases of homicide. These may include articles from the point of view of juvenile offenders, victims of crimes by juvenile offenders, policymakers and lawyers. (A note to teachers: Articles of this nature may be mature and/or include graphic content and should be reviewed.) Lead students in a debate on the pros and cons of sentencing juveniles to life in prison.

Encourage students to find their own articles and opinion pieces; the following are suggestions that may help them get started:

- ***The New York Times*: "When to Punish a Young Offender, and When to Rehabilitate"**
<http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2012/06/05/when-to-punish-a-young-offender-and-when-to-rehabilitate>
- **The Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth**

- **Voices of Families of Victims:**
<http://fairsentencingofyouth.org/voices/voices-of-families-of-victims/>
- **Voices of Formerly Incarcerated Youth:**
<http://fairsentencingofyouth.org/voices/voices-of-advocates/>
- **NPR: “Do Juvenile Killers Deserve Life Behind Bars?”**
<http://www.npr.org/2012/03/20/148538071/do-juvenile-killers-deserve-life-behind-bars>
- **The National Center for Victims of Crime: “Common Ground: What Crime Victims Need from the Juvenile Justice System”**
<http://www.victimsofcrime.org/docs/casey-foundation-roundtable/common-ground-what-victims-expect-from-juvenile-justice.pdf>

2. What’s Happening In Your State?

Have students investigate legislation for juvenile sentencing in their state.

Consider the following questions:

- At what age does your state consider an individual an adult?
- What is your state’s current legislation for juvenile sentencing?
- Is your state currently considering new legislation in relation the issue?
- Do you agree with your state’s stance on juvenile sentencing? Why or why not?

Have students write to prison officials and legislators to share their thoughts on the policies.

3. Support Services and Rehabilitation

Begin by having students brainstorm and propose the kinds of rehabilitation programs they think should be provided for juvenile offenders (including those tried as juveniles who may now be adults). This may include one or all of the following: preventative programs, programs while incarcerated and programs following release from prison.

Ask students to research and assess rehabilitation programs currently offered to juvenile offenders in prison. Questions to investigate may include: Who has access to these services? When do they have access to them? What preventative services are provided to young adults at risk of entering the juvenile justice system? What services are provided for those who are released from prison? How much do these programs cost? What are the goals of these services? Are they successful? What are the benefits and drawbacks of providing services like these to juvenile offenders?

4. The History of Juvenile Justice in the United States

Have students research the history of the juvenile justice system in the United States, beginning with its establishment in 1899. Invite students to answer the following questions through a group discussion, presentations, or short essays:

- Why was the juvenile justice system established?
- How has it changed over time? What factors have contributed to these changes?

RESOURCES

15 to Life: Kenneth's Story

<http://15tolifethefilm.com>

The film's website offers a number of resources, including additional information about people in the film, timelines, state-by-state information on juvenile sentencing, status of related legislation, suggestions for action and links to news reports.

POV: *15 to Life: Kenneth's Story*

<http://www.pbs.org/pov/15tolife>

The POV site for the film includes online features, a discussion guide with additional discussion prompts and activity suggestions and a reading list.

Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention

<http://www.ojjdp.gov/>

This government website offers information, statistics and resources related to the juvenile justice system.

STANDARDS

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects

(http://www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI_ELA%20Standards.pdf)

[SL.9-10.1, 11-12.1](#) Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade level topics, texts and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

[SL.9-10.1.D](#) Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections in light of the evidence and reasoning presented.

[SL.9-10.2](#) Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source.

SL.11-12.2 Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) in order to make informed decisions and solve problems, evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source and noting any discrepancies among the data.

[SL.9-10.3](#) Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning and use of evidence and rhetoric, identifying any fallacious reasoning or exaggerated or distorted evidence.

SL.11-12.3 Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning and use of evidence and rhetoric, assessing the stance, premises, links among ideas, word choice, points of emphasis and tone used.

[R.I.11-12.7](#) Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.

[RH.9-10.1](#) Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.

RH.11-12.1 Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

[RH.11-12.7](#) Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

[RH.9-10.9](#) Compare and contrast treatments of the same topic in several primary and secondary sources.

[W.9-10.2,11-12.2](#) Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization and analysis of content.

McREL (www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/) a compilation of content standards and benchmarks for K-12 curriculum by McREL (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning)

Civics, Standard 18: Understands the role and importance of law in the American constitutional system and issues regarding the judicial protections of individual rights.

Civics, Standard 19, Level IV (Grade 9-12) 7: Knows how to use criteria such as logical validity, factual accuracy, emotional appeal, distorted

evidence and appeals to bias or prejudice in order to evaluate various forms of historical and contemporary political communication.

Civics, Standard 21: Understands the formation and implementation of public policy.

Historical Understanding, Standard 1: Understands and knows how to analyze chronological relationships and patterns.

Historical Understanding, Standard 2: Understands the historical perspective.

Language Arts, Standard 9: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.

Thinking and Reasoning, Standard 3: Effectively uses mental processes that are based on identifying similarities and differences.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephanie Joy Tisdale is an educator and the associate editor of *The Liberator Magazine*. She has spent the last 10 years teaching elementary, middle and high school students. She now works as a curriculum writer and consultant.