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Life-without-parole youth terms scrutinized

U.N., whose rulings are nonbinding, will review whether Michigan's law violates rights treaty.

David Eggert / Associated Press

LANSING -- A United Nations panel is expected to start reviewing whether life-without-parole sentences for juveniles in Michigan and 41 other states violate an international treaty on human rights.

Critics of Michigan's law will brief the U.N. Human Rights Committee later this week.

Just over 300 Michigan inmates convicted of crimes committed before age 18 are serving a life sentence without the possibility of parole.

A study by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International shows Michigan has the second-highest rate of imposing life sentences without parole on juveniles.

Kary Moss, executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Michigan, said young offenders deserve a second chance, arguing they have less capacity than adults to understand the consequences of their actions.

Democratic-sponsored bills in the state Legislature would bar juveniles from being sentenced to life without parole and give those already in prison a chance for parole, but they are opposed by Republicans who control the House and Senate.

"We certainly hope Michigan lawmakers will take note when their own state is being brought up for international attention," said Moss.

But Rep. William Van Regenmorter, a Republican from Ottawa County's Georgetown Township who chairs the House Judiciary Committee, said the state's juvenile sentencing law is appropriate, arguing that crimes committed by youth are becoming more violent.

"It's appropriate for persons to have the time match the crime," Van Regenmorter said. "We're talking very serious offenses here."

Van Regenmorter said prisoners serving life already can petition the governor to commute or pardon their sentences. Moss acknowledged that criticism by the U.N. panel brings no penalties beyond international scrutiny.

On the Net: ACLU of Michigan: www.aclumich.org. U.N. Human Rights Commission: www.ohchr.org/english.

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