The Importance of Individualized Sentencing in Juvenile Cases

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In the early morning of May 2, 1999, a then fifteen-year-old Rene Zarate stabbed Jorge Ramos 50 times with a fishing knife, resulting in his death. Zarate, having entered the juvenile justice system around the age of fourteen, was on probation at the time of the murder and was fearful Ramos would call authorities on Zarate and his friends who were drinking in the mobile home Ramos rented a room in, potentially having adverse effects on his probation. After questioning, Zarate confessed to Ramos’ murder. On February 8, 2001, a jury convicted Renee Zarate of murder in the first degree, a class "A" felony, in violation of Iowa Code section 707.2 (1999). Zarate was subsequently sentenced to mandatory life imprisonment without the possibility of parole pursuant to Iowa Code section 902.1(2). The defendant challenged his sentence stating it was a violation of the Eighth Amendment of the United States Constitution and article I, section 17 of the Iowa Constitution which both prohibit cruel and unusual punishment. The district court’s ruling on the case demonstrates how the circumstances of the crime and other aggravating factors overpowering mitigating factors. As a result, the sentencing judge abused their discretion by imposing a mandatory minimum of ten additional years of imprisonment on the belief there should be a minimum sentence of time for somebody that takes the life of another individual, regardless of age. The developmental differences between juveniles and adults demonstrates the poor discretion to apply the minimum sentence given to adult offenders.