

COMMONWEALTH OF KENTUCKY  
FAYETTE CIRCUIT COURT  
SEVENTH DIVISION  
CASE NO. 15-CR-584-001



COMMONWEALTH OF KENTUCKY

PLAINTIFF

v.

EFRAIN DIAZ

DEFENDANT

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**ORDER DECLARING KENTUCKY'S DEATH PENALTY STATUTE AS  
UNCONSTITUTIONAL**

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This matter comes before the Court on Defendant Efrain Diaz's Motion to declare the Kentucky death penalty statute unconstitutional insofar as it permits capital punishment for those under twenty-one (21) years of age at the time of their offense. Mr. Diaz argues that the death penalty would be cruel and unusual punishment, in violation of the Eighth Amendment, for an offender under twenty-one (21) at the time of the offense. The defense claims that recent scientific research shows that individuals under twenty-one (21) are psychologically immature in the same way that individuals under the age of eighteen (18) were deemed immature, and therefore ineligible for the death penalty, in *Roper v. Simmons*, 543 U.S. 551 (2005). The Commonwealth in turn argues that Kentucky's death penalty statute is constitutional and that there is no national consensus with respect to offenders under twenty-one (21). Having the benefit of memoranda of law, expert testimony, and the arguments of counsel, and being otherwise sufficiently advised, the Court sustains the Defendant's motion.

## FINDINGS OF FACT

Efrain Diaz was indicted on the charges of Murder, First Degree Robbery, Theft by Unlawful Taking \$10,000 or More, and three Class A Misdemeanors for events which occurred on April 17, 2015, when Mr. Diaz was eighteen (18) years and seven (7) months old.

On July 17, 2017, the Court heard testimony from Dr. Laurence Steinberg, an expert in adolescent development, testified to the maturational differences between adolescents (individuals ten (10) to twenty-one (21) years of age) and adults (twenty-one (21) and over). The most significant of these differences being that adolescents are more impulsive, more likely to misperceive risk, less able to regulate behavior, more easily emotionally aroused, and, importantly, more capable of change. Additionally, Dr. Steinberg explained how these differences are exacerbated in the presence of peers and under emotionally stressful situations, whereas there is no such effect with adults. Dr. Steinberg related these differences to an individual's culpability and capacity for rehabilitation and concluded that, "if a different version of *Roper* were heard today, knowing what we know now, one could've made the very same arguments about eighteen (18), nineteen (19), and twenty (20) year olds that were made about sixteen (16) and seventeen (17) year olds in *Roper*."<sup>1</sup> Dr. Steinberg supplemented his testimony with a report further detailing the structural and functional changes responsible for these differences between adolescents and adults, as will be discussed later in this opinion.<sup>2</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS OF LAW

The Eighth Amendment to the United States Constitution states, "[e]xcessive bail shall not be required, nor excessive fines imposed, nor cruel and unusual punishments inflicted." U.S.C.A.

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<sup>1</sup> Hearing July 17, 2017 at 9:02:31.

<sup>2</sup> Affidavit of Kenneth B. Benedict, July 14, 2017.

Const. amend. VIII. This provision is applicable to the states through the Fourteenth Amendment. The protection flows from the basic “precept of justice that punishment for crime should be graduated and proportioned to [the] offense.” *Atkins v. Virginia*, 536 U.S. 304, 311 (2002) (quoting *Weems v. United States*, 217 U.S. 349, 367 (1910)). Eighth Amendment jurisprudence has seen the consistent reference to “the evolving standards of decency that mark the progress of a maturing society” to determine which punishments are so disproportionate as to be “cruel and unusual.” *Trop v. Dulles*, 356 U.S. 86, 100-101 (1958). The two prongs of the “evolving standards of decency” test are: (1) objective indicia of national consensus, and (2) the Court’s own determination in the exercise of independent judgment. *Stanford v. Kentucky*, 492 U.S. 361 (1989); *Atkins*, 536 U.S. 304; *Roper*, 543 U.S. 551 (2005).

#### **I. Objective Indicia of National Consensus Against Execution of Offenders Younger than 21**

Since *Roper*, six (6) states<sup>3</sup> have abolished the death penalty, making a total of nineteen (19) states and the District of Columbia without a death penalty statute. Additionally, the governors of four (4) states<sup>4</sup> have imposed moratoria on executions in the last five (5) years. Of the states that do have a death penalty statute and no governor-imposed moratoria, seven<sup>5</sup> (7) have *de facto* prohibitions on the execution of offenders under twenty-one (21) years of age, including Kentucky. Taken together, there are currently thirty states in which a defendant who was under the age of

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<sup>3</sup> The states that have abolished the death penalty since *Roper* and year of abolition: Connecticut (2012), Illinois (2011), Maryland (2013), New Jersey (2007), New Mexico (2009), and New York (2007).

<sup>4</sup> The governors of Pennsylvania and Washington imposed moratoria on the death penalty in 2015 and 2014, respectively. The governor of Oregon extended a previously imposed moratorium in 2015. The governor of Colorado granted an indefinite stay of execution to a death row inmate in 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Kansas and New Hampshire have not executed anyone since 1977. Montana and Wyoming have never executed anyone who was under twenty-one (21) years of age at the time of their offenses, and they currently have no such offenders on death row. Utah has not executed anyone who was under twenty-one (21) years of age at the time of their offense in the last fifteen (15) years, and no such offender is currently on Utah’s death row. Idaho and Kentucky have not executed anyone who was under twenty-one (21) years old at the time of their offense in the last fifteen (15) years.

twenty-one (21) at the time of their offense would not be executed – ten (10) of which have made their prohibition on the death penalty official since the decision in *Roper* in 2005.

Of the thirty-one (31) states with a death penalty statute, only nine (9) executed defendants who were under the age of twenty-one (21) at the time of their offense between 2011 and 2016.<sup>6</sup> Those nine (9) states have executed a total of thirty-three (33) defendants under the age of twenty-one (21) since 2011 – nineteen (19) of which have been in Texas alone.<sup>7</sup> Considering Texas an outlier, there have only been fourteen (14) executions of defendants under the age of twenty-one (21) between 2011 and 2016, compared to twenty-nine (29) executions in the years 2006 to 2011, and twenty-seven (27) executions in the years 2001 to 2006 (again, excluding Texas).<sup>8</sup> In short, the number of executions of defendants under twenty-one (21) in the last five (5) years has been cut in half from the two (2) previous five- (5) year periods.

Looking at the death penalty as practically applied to all defendants, since 1999 there has been a distinct downward trend in death sentences and executions. In 1999, 279 offenders nationwide were sentenced to death, compared to just thirty (30) in 2016 – just about eleven (11) percent of the number sentenced in 1999.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, the number of defendants actually executed spiked in 1999 at ninety-eight (98), and then gradually decreased to just twenty (20) in 2016 – only two of which were between the ages of eighteen (18) and twenty (20).

Contrary to the Commonwealth's assertion, it appears there is a very clear national consensus trending toward restricting the death penalty, especially in the case where defendants

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<sup>6</sup> Chart of Number of People Executed Who Were Aged 18, 19, or 20 at Offense from 2000 to Present, By State [current as of February 29, 2016]

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

<sup>8</sup> *Id.*

<sup>9</sup> Death Penalty Information Center, Facts About the Death Penalty (Updated May 12, 2017), downloaded from <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/documents/FactSheet.pdf>.

are eighteen (18) to twenty-one (21) years of age. Not only have six more states abolished the death penalty since *Roper* in 2005, four more have imposed moratoria on executions, and seven more have *de facto* prohibitions on the execution of defendants eighteen (18) to twenty-one (21). In addition to the recent legislative opposition to the death penalty, since 1999 courts have also shown a reluctance to impose death sentences on offenders, especially those eighteen (18) to twenty-one (21). “[T]he objective indicia of consensus in this case – the rejection of the juvenile death penalty in the majority of States; the infrequency of its use even where it remains on the books; and the consistency in the trend toward abolition of the practice – provide sufficient evidence that today our society views juveniles ... as ‘categorically less culpable than the average criminal.’” *Roper*, 543 U.S. at 567 (quoting *Atkins*, 536 U.S. at 316). Given this consistent direction of change, this Court thinks it clear that the national consensus is growing more and more opposed to the death penalty, as applied to defendants eighteen (18) to twenty-one (21).

## **2. The Court’s Independent Judgment**

As the Supreme Court in *Roper* heavily relied on scientific studies to come to its conclusion, so will this Court. On July 17, 2017, this Court heard expert testimony on this topic. Dr. Laurence Steinberg testified and was also allowed to supplement his testimony with a written report. The report cited multiple recent studies supporting the conclusion that individuals under twenty-one (21) years of age are categorically less culpable in the same ways that the Court in *Roper* decided individuals under eighteen (18) were less culpable. It is based on those studies that this Court has come to the conclusion that the death penalty should be excluded for defendants who were under the age of twenty-one (21) at the time of their offense.

If the science in 2005 mandated the ruling in *Roper*, the science in 2017 mandates this ruling.

Through the use of functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI), scientists of the late 1990s and early 2000s discovered that key brain systems and structures, especially those involved in self-regulation and higher-order cognition, continue to mature through an individual's late teens.<sup>10</sup> Further study of brain development conducted in the past ten (10) years has shown that these key brain systems and structures actually continue to mature well into the mid-twenties (20s); this notion is now widely accepted among neuroscientists.<sup>11</sup>

Recent psychological research indicates that individuals in their late teens and early twenties (20s) are less mature than their older counterparts in several important ways.<sup>12</sup> First, these individuals are more likely than adults to underestimate the number, seriousness, and likelihood of risks involved in a given situation.<sup>13</sup> Second, they are more likely to engage in “sensation-seeking,” the pursuit of arousing, rewarding, exciting, or novel experiences. This tendency is especially pronounced among individuals between the ages of eighteen (18) and twenty-one (21).<sup>14</sup> Third, individuals in their late teens and early twenties (20s) are less able than older individuals to control their impulses and consider the future consequences of their actions and decisions because

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<sup>10</sup> B. J. Casey, et al., *Imaging the Developing Brain: What Have We Learned About Cognitive Development?*, 9 TRENDS IN COGNITIVE SCI. 104-110 (2005).

<sup>11</sup> N. Dosenbach, et al., *Prediction of Individual Brain Maturity Using fMRI*, 329 SCI. 1358-1361 (2011); D. Fair, et al., *Functional Brain Networks Develop From a “Local to Distributed” Organization*, 5 PLOS COMPUTATIONAL BIOLOGY 1-14 (2009); A. Hedman, et al., *Human Brain Changes Across the Life Span: A Review of 56 Longitudinal Magnetic Resonance Imaging Studies*, 33 HUM. BRAIN MAPPING 1987-2002 (2012); A. Pfefferbaum, et al., *Variation in Longitudinal Trajectories of Regional Brain Volumes of Healthy Men and Women (Ages 10 to 85 Years) Measures with Atlas-Based Parcellation of MRI*, 65 NEUROIMAGE 176-193 (2013); D. Simmonds, et al., *Developmental Stages and Sex Differences of White Matter and Behavioral Development Through Adolescence: A Longitudinal Diffusion Tensor Imaging (DTI) Study*, 92 NEUROIMAGE 356-368 (2014); L. Somerville, et al., *A Time of Change: Behavioral and Neural Correlates of Adolescent Sensitivity to Appetitive and Aversive Environmental Cues*, 72 BRAIN & COGNITION 124-133 (2010).

<sup>12</sup> For a recent review of this research, see: LAURENCE STEINBERG, *AGE OF OPPORTUNITY: LESSONS FROM THE NEW SCIENCE OF ADOLESCENCE* (2014).

<sup>13</sup> T. Grisso, et al., *Juveniles' Competence to Stand Trial: A Comparison of Adolescents' and Adults' Capacities as Trial Defendants*, 27 LAW & HUM. BEHAV. 333-363 (2003).

<sup>14</sup> E. Cauffman, et al., *Age Differences in Affective Decision Making as Indexed by Performance on the Iowa Gambling Task*, 46 DEV. PSYCHOL. 193-207 (2010); L. Steinberg, et al., *Around the World, Adolescence is a Time of Heightened Sensation Seeking and Immature Self-Regulation*, DEV. SCI. Advance online publication. doi: 10.1111/desc.12532. (2017).

gains in impulse control continue to occur during the early twenties (20s).<sup>15</sup> Fourth, basic cognitive abilities, such as memory and logical reasoning, mature before emotional abilities, including the ability to exercise self-control, to properly consider the risks and rewards of alternative courses of action, and to resist coercive pressure from others. Thus, one may be intellectually mature but also socially and emotionally immature.<sup>16</sup> As a consequence of this gap between intellectual and emotional maturity, these differences are exacerbated when adolescents and young adults are making decisions in situations that are emotionally arousing, including those that generate negative emotions, such as fear, threat, anger, or anxiety.<sup>17</sup> The presence of peers also amplifies these differences because this activates the brain's "reward center" in individuals in their late teens and early twenties (20s). Importantly, the presence of peers has no such effect on adults.<sup>18</sup> In recent experimental studies, the peak age for risky decision-making was determined to be between nineteen (19) and twenty-one (21).<sup>19</sup>

Recent neurobiological research parallels the above psychological conclusions. This research has shown that the main cause for psychological immaturity during adolescence and the early twenties (20s) is the difference in timing of the maturation of two important brain systems. The system that is responsible for the increase in sensation-seeking and reward-seeking—

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<sup>15</sup> L. Steinberg, et al., *Age Difference in Future Orientation and Delay Discounting*, 80 CHILD DEV. 28-44 (2009); D. Albert, et al., *Age Difference in Sensation Seeking and Impulsivity as Indexed by Behavior and Self-Report: Evidence for a Dual Systems Model*, 44 DEV. PSYCHOL. 1764-1778 (2008).

<sup>16</sup> L. Steinberg, et al., *Are Adolescents Less Mature Than Adults? Minors' Access to Abortion, the Juvenile Death Penalty, and the Alleged APA "Flip-Flop,"* 64 AM. PSYCHOLOGIST 583-594 (2009).

<sup>17</sup> A. Cohen, et al., *When is an Adolescent an Adult? Assessing Cognitive Control in Emotional and Non-Emotional Contexts*, 4 PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCE 549-562 (2016); L. Steinberg, et al., *Are Adolescents Less Mature Than Adults? Minors' Access to Abortion, the Juvenile Death Penalty, and the Alleged APA "Flip-Flop,"* 64 AM. PSYCHOLOGIST 583-594 (2009).

<sup>18</sup> D. Albert, et al., *The Teenage Brain: Peer Influences on Adolescent Decision-Making*, 22 CURRENT DIRECTIONS IN PSYCHOL. SCI. 114-120 (2013).

<sup>19</sup> B. Braams, et al., *Longitudinal Changes in Adolescent Risk-Taking: A Comprehensive Study of Neural Responses to Rewards, Pubertal Development and Risk Taking Behavior*, 35 J. OF NEUROSCIENCE 7226-7238 (2015); E. Shulman & E. Cauffman, *Deciding in the Dark: Age Differences in Intuitive Risk Judgment*, 50 DEV. PSYCHOL. 167-177 (2014).

sometimes referred to as the “socio-emotional system”—undergoes dramatic changes around the time of puberty, and stays highly active through the late teen years and into the early twenties (20s). However, the system that is responsible for self-control, regulating impulses, thinking ahead, evaluating the risks and rewards of an action, and resisting peer pressure—referred to as the “cognitive control system”—is still undergoing significant development well into the mid-twenties (20s).<sup>20</sup> Thus, during middle and late adolescence there is a “maturational imbalance” between the socio-emotional system and the cognitive control system that inclines adolescents toward sensation-seeking and impulsivity. As the cognitive control system catches up during an individual’s twenties (20s), one is more capable of controlling impulses, resisting peer pressure, and thinking ahead.<sup>21</sup>

There are considerable structural changes and improvements in connectivity across regions of the brain which allow for this development. These structural changes are mainly the result of two processes: synaptic pruning (the elimination of unnecessary connections between neurons, allowing for more efficient transmission of information) and myelination (insulation of neuronal connections, allowing the brain to transmit information more quickly). While synaptic pruning is mostly complete by age sixteen (16), myelination continues through the twenties (20s).<sup>22</sup> Thus, while the development of the prefrontal cortex (logical reasoning, planning, personality) is largely finished by the late teens, the maturation of connections between the prefrontal cortex and regions

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<sup>20</sup> B. J. Casey, et al., *The Storm and Stress of Adolescence: Insights from Human Imaging and Mouse Genetics*, 52 DEV. PSYCHOL. 225-235 (2010); L. Steinberg, *A Social Neuroscience Perspective on Adolescent Risk-Taking*, 28 DEV. REV. 78-106 (2008); L. Van Leijenhorst, et al., *Adolescent Risky Decision-making: Neurocognitive Development of Reward and Control Regions*, 51 NEUROIMAGE 345-355 (2010).

<sup>21</sup> D. Albert & L. Steinberg, *Judgment and Decision Making in Adolescence*, 21 J. OF RES. ON ADOLESCENCE 211-224 (2011); S-J Blakemore & T. Robbins, *Decision-Making in the Adolescent Brain*, 15 NAT. NEUROSCIENCE 1184-1191 (2012).

<sup>22</sup> S-J, Blakemore, *Imaging Brain Development: The Adolescent Brain*, 61 NEUROIMAGE 397-406 (2012); R. Engle, *The Teen Brain*, 22(2) CURRENT DIRECTIONS IN PSYCHOL. SCI. (whole issue) (2013); M. Luciana (Ed.), *Adolescent Brain Development: Current Themes and Future Directions*, 72(2) BRAIN & COGNITION (whole issue) (2010).



which govern self-regulation and emotions continues into the mid-twenties (20s).<sup>23</sup> This supports the psychological findings spelled out above which conclude that even intellectual young adults may have trouble controlling impulses and emotions, especially in the presence of peers and in emotionally arousing situations.

Perhaps one of the most germane studies to this opinion illustrated this development gap by asking teenagers, young adults (18-21), and mid-twenties adults to demonstrate impulse control under both emotionally neutral and emotionally arousing conditions.<sup>24</sup> Under emotionally neutral conditions, individuals between eighteen (18) and twenty-one (21) were able to control their impulses just as well as those in their mid-twenties (20s). However, under emotionally arousing conditions, eighteen- (18) to twenty-one- (21) year-olds demonstrated levels of impulsive behavior and patterns of brain activity comparable to those in their mid-teens.<sup>25</sup> Put simply, under feelings of stress, anger, fear, threat, etc., the brain of a twenty- (20) year-old functions similarly to a sixteen- (16) or seventeen- (17) year-old.

In addition to this maturational imbalance, one of the hallmarks of neurobiological development during adolescence is the heightened plasticity—the ability to change in response to experience—of the brain. One of the periods of the most marked neuroplasticity is during an individual's late teens and early twenties (20s), indicating that this group has strong potential for behavioral change.<sup>26</sup> Given adolescents' ongoing development and heightened plasticity, it is difficult to predict future criminality or delinquent behavior from antisocial behavior during the

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<sup>23</sup> L. Steinberg, *The Influence of Neuroscience on U.S. Supreme Court Decisions Involving Adolescents' Criminal Culpability*, 14 NAT. REV. NEUROSCIENCE 513-518 (2013).

<sup>24</sup> A. Cohen, et al., *When is an Adolescent an Adult? Assessing Cognitive Control in Emotional and Non-Emotional Contexts*, 4 PSYCHOL. SCI. 549-562 (2016).

<sup>25</sup> *Id.*

<sup>26</sup> LAURENCE STEINBERG, *AGE OF OPPORTUNITY: LESSONS FROM THE NEW SCIENCE OF ADOLESCENCE* (2014).

teen years, even among teenagers accused of committing violent crimes.<sup>27</sup> In fact, many researchers have conducted studies finding that approximately ninety (90) percent of serious juvenile offenders age out of crime and do not continue criminal behavior into adulthood.<sup>28</sup>

Justin Diaz was eighteen (18) years and seven (7) months old at the time of the alleged crime. According to recent scientific studies, Mr. Diaz fits into the group experiencing the “maturational imbalance,” during which his system for sensation-seeking, impulsivity, and susceptibility to peer pressure was fully developed, while his system for planning and impulse control lagged behind, unable to override those impulses. He also fits into the group described in the study above which was found to act essentially like a sixteen– (16) to seventeen– (17) year–old under emotionally arousing conditions, such as, for example, robbing a store. Most importantly, this research shows that eighteen– (18) to twenty-one– (21) year–olds are categorically less culpable for the same three reasons that the Supreme Court in *Roper* found teenagers under eighteen (18) to be: (1) they lack maturity to control their impulses and fully consider both the risks and rewards of an action, making them unlikely to be deterred by knowledge of likelihood and severity of punishment; (2) they are susceptible to peer pressure and emotional influence, which exacerbates their existing immaturity when in groups or under stressful conditions; and (3) their character is not yet well formed due to the neuroplasticity of the young brain, meaning that they have a much better chance at rehabilitation than do adults.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> T. Moffitt, *Life-Course Persistent Versus Adolescent-Limited Antisocial Behavior*, 3(2) DEV. & PSYCHOPATHOLOGY (2016).

<sup>28</sup> K. Monahan, et al., *Psychosocial (im)maturity from Adolescence to Early Adulthood: Distinguishing Between Adolescence-Limited and Persistent Antisocial Behavior*, 25 DEV. & PSYCHOPATHOLOGY 1093-1105 (2013); E. Mulvey, et al., *Trajectories of Desistance and Continuity in Antisocial Behavior Following Court Adjudication Among Serious Adolescent Offenders*, 22 DEV. & PSYCHOPATHOLOGY 453-475 (2010).

<sup>29</sup> *Roper*, 543 U.S. at 569-70.

Further, the Supreme Court has declared several times that “capital punishment must be limited to those offenders who commit ‘a narrow category of the most serious crimes’ and whose extreme culpability makes them ‘the most deserving of execution.’” *Roper*, 543 U.S. at 568 (quoting *Atkins*, 536 U.S. at 319); *Kennedy v. Louisiana*, 554 U.S. 407 (2008) (holding that the Eighth Amendment prohibits the death penalty for the rape of a child where the crime did not result, and was not intended to result, in the death of the victim); *Kansas v. Marsh*, 548 U.S. 163, 206 (2006) (Souter, J., dissenting) (“the death penalty must be reserved for ‘the worst of the worst’”). Given Mr. Diaz’s young age and development, it is difficult to see how he and others his age could be classified as “the most deserving of execution.”

Given the national trend toward restricting the use of the death penalty for individuals under the age of twenty-one (21), and given the recent findings by the scientific community, the death penalty would be an unconstitutionally disproportionate punishment for crimes committed by individuals under twenty-one (21) years of age. Accordingly, Kentucky’s death penalty statute is unconstitutional insofar as it permits capital punishment for offenders under twenty-one (21) at the time of their offense.

So ORDERED this the 6 day of September, 2017.



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JUDGE ERNESTO SCORSONE  
FAYETTE CIRCUIT COURT

**CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE**

The following is to certify that the foregoing was served this the 27 day of September 2017, by mailing same first class copy, postage prepaid, to the following:

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