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ATKINS, ADOLESCENCE AND THE MATURITY HEURISTIC: RATIONALES FOR A CATEGORICAL EXEMPTION FOR JUVENILES FROM CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

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**ATKINS, ADOLESCENCE AND THE MATURITY
HEURISTIC: RATIONALES FOR A CATEGORICAL
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Jeffrey Fagan*

Abstract

In Atkins v. Virginia, the U.S. Supreme Court held that mentally retarded people lacked a range of developmental capacities that were necessary to establish the higher threshold of culpability for the execution of murderers in the Court's death penalty jurisprudence. The Court emphasized that the impairments of mental retardation lead to a "...special risk of wrongful execution." The Court had previously concluded that the limitations in developmental capacities that characterize mentally retarded defendants also characterize a significant proportion of adolescent offenders. These parallels invite an extension of the Atkins Court's reasoning to juveniles by highlighting the diminished capacity for culpability common to offenders of both groups.

This Article addresses the logic and substance of an extension of Atkins to juveniles. Extending Atkins to juveniles requires analyses showing that: (a) many of the developmental characteristics that establish the diminished culpability of the mentally retarded also characterize adolescents, (b) the age-specific competencies for adolescents that define maturity and in turn culpability can be identified and then reliably measured, and (c) the age at which adolescents attain these competencies and when their developmental trajectory begins - that is, the age at which adolescent development measurably departs, both substantively and permanently, from the stable and flat developmental trajectories of the mentally retarded. The Article discusses recent evidence on the developmental capacities of adolescents showing

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that that many of the same deficits in cognitive and neuropsychological developmental that define “retardation” also are common markers of adolescence, and elements of immaturity long recognized in death penalty jurisprudence: diminished capacities to (a) understand and process information, (b) learn from experience and mistakes, engage in logical reasoning, (c) foresee the consequences of their actions, (d) control impulses, (e) understand the reactions of others, and (f) resist peer influence.

Accordingly, the Article begins by decomposing the diagnostic category of retardation into specific dimensions of underdevelopment. Next, the Article analyzes the correspondence of these dimensions of underdevelopment among the retarded to legal standards about immaturity and culpability of adolescents. If children are in fact less “formed” developmentally than adults, they lack full capacity and therefore are “less culpable” than adults. Empirical research shows that a significant number of juveniles have a pattern of developmental and cognitive incapacities that places them well below the threshold of culpability that also exempts the mentally retarded under Atkins. In addition, adolescents will vary in the age when they realize these threshold developmental competencies that constitute maturity and in turn culpability, complicating attribution of full culpability to adolescents at the higher threshold set in death penalty jurisprudence. Recent evidence also suggests that brain development in areas controlling the developmental components of maturity may be incomplete at age 18 or beyond.

The Article concludes because defendants with diminished competence and culpability, like the mentally retarded, are immature at age 18 and beyond, that there is sufficient evidence in social science to create a categorical exemption from capital punishment for adolescents who commit murders before the age of 18. The alternative – creating exempted categories such as the immature – invites disputes about how to reliably establish membership. Such classifications will be unreliable and inevitably suffer from the subjective risks of misdiagnosis, testing error, instrument unreliability, or other limits of behavioral science. To ignore the logic of Atkins elevates the risk of an erroneous attribution of cognitive and volitional maturity to a seemingly competent adolescent whose developmental reality may be exactly the opposite, raising the terrible risk of a death sentence where it is not deserved.

I. INTRODUCTION

In *Atkins v. Virginia*,¹ the U.S. Supreme Court voted six to three to bar further use of the death penalty for mentally retarded offenders. The Court offered three reasons for banning the execution of the retarded. First, citing a shift in public opinion over the thirteen years since *Penry v. Lynaugh*,² the Court in *Atkins* ruled that the execution of the mentally retarded is “cruel and unusual punishment” prohibited by the Eighth Amendment. Second, the Court concluded that retaining the death penalty for the mentally retarded would not serve the interest in retribution or deterrence that are essential to capital jurisprudence. *Atkins* held that mentally retarded people lacked a range of developmental capacities that were necessary to establish the higher threshold of culpability for the execution of murderers that the Court had established in *Furman*,³ *Gregg*,⁴ *Coker*,⁵ *Woodson v. North Carolina*,⁶ and *Enmund*.⁷ Third, the *Atkins* Court noted that the impairments of mental retardation lead to a “special risk of wrongful execution.”⁸

The *Atkins* decision, though welcomed by both both popular and legal policy audiences, naturally raises the question: what about juveniles? After all, the very same limitations in developmental capacities that characterize mentally retarded defendants also characterize a significant proportion of adolescent offenders.⁹ The parallels between capital punishment for adolescents and for the mentally retarded have been echoed both in popular and legal discourse since the resumption of capital punishment following *Furman*.¹⁰ Prior

¹ *Atkins v. Virginia*, 536 U.S. 304 (2002)

² *Penry v. Lynaugh*, 492 U.S. 302 (1989).

³ *Furman v. Georgia*, 408 US 238 (1972)

⁴ *Gregg v. Georgia*, 428 US 153 (1976)

⁵ *Coker v. Georgia*, 433 U.S. 584 (1977)

⁶ *Woodson v. North Carolina*, 428 U.S. 280 (1976)

⁷ *Enmund v Florida*, 458 US 782 (1982)

⁸ *Atkins* at 350.

⁹ See, e.g., Ruben C. Gur, Declaration of Ruben C. Gur, PhD, *Patterson v. Texas*, 123 S.Ct. 24 (Mem) (2002), Petition for Writ of *Certiorari* to US Supreme Court, J., Gary Hart, Counsel (available at: www.abanet.org/crimjust/juvjus/patterson.html, visited March 20, 2003). See, also, Juvenile Justice Center, Criminal Justice Section, American Bar Association, Adolescent Brain Development and Legal Culpability (available at http://www.abanet.org/crimjust/juvjus/factsheets_brain_development.pdf, visited March 20, 2003).

¹⁰ The American Bar Association resolution calling for a ban on the execution of individuals for capital crimes committed before their 18th birthday also calls for a ban on executions of the mentally retarded:

The ABA has established policies against the execution of both persons with "mental retardation," as defined by the American Association of Mental Retardation, and persons who were under the age of 18 at the time of their offenses. Nevertheless, the Supreme Court has upheld the constitutionality of executions in

to *Atkins*, many groups protested the use of capital punishment for both types of offenders, invoking arguments against capital punishment that applied equally to each.¹¹ The popular coupling of concerns about adolescents with concerns about the retarded seemed to naturally invite an extension of the *Atkins* court's reasoning to juveniles by highlighting the diminished capacity for culpability common to offenders of both groups.¹² In fact, on August 30, 2002, in a rare dissent from an order declining to stay an execution, Justices Stevens, Breyer, and Ginsburg urged the court to reconsider the constitutionality of allowing juveniles to be sentenced to death.¹³ In reference to the *Atkins* decision, the justices argued that reexamining the "juvenile" issue was warranted, thereby underscoring yet again the similarities between both cases.

Whether these Justices were referring to normative concerns or scientific evidence is unclear. Both clinical and empirical evidence suggest, however, that many of the same deficits in various cognitive competencies that define "retardation" also are markers of adolescence. In *Atkins*, the Court found that persons with mental retardation have "diminished capacities to understand and process information, to communicate, to abstract from mistakes and learn from experience, to engage in logical reasoning, to control impulses, and to understand the reactions of others."¹⁴ Recent empirical and theoretical scholarship on the developmental capacities of adolescents generally and adolescent

both of those instances. While many states now bar executions of the retarded, other states continue to execute both retarded individuals and, on occasion, offenders who were under 18 at the time they committed the offenses for which they were executed (*See American Bar Ass'n, Resolution of the House of Delegates (Feb. 1997)*, reprinted in Victor Streib, *Moratorium on the Death Penalty for Juveniles*, 61 *L. & Contemp. Probs.* 219, Appendix (Autumn 1998).

¹¹ However, several commentators opposed this linkage. *Id.* at 221. "For analysis, the young and the retarded should not be treated the same, and generally are not for legal and governmental purposes such as rights to vote, to drink, to marry, and the like. In actual practice, as is discussed later in this article, the legislatures and courts have not treated these categories the same for purposes of the death penalty." *See*, Victor L. Streib, *Executing Women, Children, and the Retarded: Second Class Citizens in Capital Punishment*, in *AMERICA'S EXPERIMENT WITH CAPITAL PUNISHMENT: REFLECTIONS ON THE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE OF THE ULTIMATE PENAL SANCTION* 201 (James R. Acker et al. eds., 1998).

¹² A May 2002 CNN/USA Today/Gallup poll, conducted one month before the *Atkins* decision, found that 64 percent of Americans support the death penalty, but 69 percent of Americans oppose executing juveniles. About 58 percent of the American population lives in states that prohibit the execution of juveniles, compared to 51 percent who live in states that opposed execution of the mentally retarded at the time that *Atkins* was decided. *See*, Amnesty International, *Indecent and Internationally Illegal; The death penalty against child offenders* (<http://web.amnesty.org/> ; September 25, 2002).

¹³ *See, Patterson v. Texas*, 123 S.Ct. 24 (Mem) (2002) (Stevens, Ginsburg, Breyer dissenting). *See*, also, Adam Liptak, *Three Justices Call for Reviewing Death Sentences for Juveniles*, *The New York Times*; August 30, 2002.

¹⁴ *Atkins*. at 2250-51

offenders in particular suggest that adolescence itself is characterized by a constellation of development deficits that closely align with the developmental incapacities of the mentally retarded.¹⁵ In fact, these characteristics may be so closely aligned as to establish their categorical similarity.

This cluster of developmental incapacities place both adolescents and mentally retarded persons below the threshold of culpability that constitutional jurisprudence mandates in capital cases.¹⁶ Extending the logic of *Atkins* to juveniles, then, requires analyses showing that: (a) many of the developmental characteristics that establish the diminished culpability of the mentally retarded also characterize adolescents, (b) the age-specific competencies for adolescents that define maturity and in turn culpability can be identified and then reliably measured, and (c) the age at which adolescents attain these competencies and when their developmental trajectory begins - that is, the age at which adolescent development measurably departs, both substantively and permanently, from the stable and flat developmental trajectories of the mentally retarded.

The latter question further complicates the application of the *Atkins* holdings to juveniles. Bright lines are not the preferred conclusions of social scientists, often to the frustration of legal scholars.¹⁷ The age at which adolescents realize the developmental competencies that constitute culpability will vary: a significant number of juveniles will be immature and lacking in the developmental attributes of culpability well before age 18, and some may still lack these competencies after age 18; a few may have attained full maturity

¹⁵ See infra notes 78 and 79 and accompanying text.

¹⁶ The Court in *Atkins* also stated that mentally retarded persons less likely to meet tests that establish their trial competence: they are more vulnerable to false confessions and less able to assist counsel at trial, they are "...less likely [to] process the information of the possibility of execution as a penalty," making them vulnerable to "...a special risk of wrongful execution" (Id. at 2251-52). The Association of Retarded Citizens (ARC) points out that a mentally retarded individual may (a) pretend to understand concepts that he does not; (b) not want his condition to be viewed as a disability (c) attempt to act more mature than his faculties will allow; (d) say what he thinks others want to hear; (e) be overwhelmed by the presence of authority; and (f) have a difficulty describing the details of events to others. See *Several Statements about Mental Retardation, ARC Statements*; <http://www.geocities.com/savepenry>, last accessed on October 1, 2002. These same incompetencies limit the ability of adolescents to meet the procedural standards for trial as an adult. See, generally, Robert Schwartz and Thomas Grisso (eds.), *YOUTH ON TRIAL* (2000). Despite the conceptual and empirical convergence of the dimensions of competence and culpability, I focus in this essay only on the question of culpability.

¹⁷ See, for example, Lee Epstein and Gary King, *The Rules of Inference*, *UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO LAW REVIEW* 69: 1-119 (2000); Robert C. Ellickson, *Trends in Legal Scholarship: A Statistical Study*, *JOURNAL OF LEGAL STUDIES*, 29: 517 (2000); Michael Heise, *The Importance of Being Empirical*, *PEPPERDINE LAW REVIEW*, 26: 807 (1999).

by the age threshold of 16 set by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Stanford v. Kentucky*,¹⁸ but most will not. In other words, the risk of serious reversible error is higher for adolescents due to the variability in the age at which they attain the cognitive and other developmental capacities necessary to be culpable for their criminal acts. Failing to account for this fact invites the risk of executing an adolescent whose culpability does not rise to the constitutional thresholds defined in *Atkins* or other death penalty cases that set a high bar of culpability.¹⁹ This risk is acute and more jurisprudentially challenging than the considerations that attach to mentally retarded adults.

This Article addresses these questions by first examining both the jurisprudence and social science of retardation. Whereas the courts have given primacy to determinations of IQ to assess mental retardation, clinical and epidemiological evidence suggests that retardation is a multidimensional diagnostic category, and that its determination is fraught with scientific judgments that carry varying degrees of error. The Court recognized this complexity in *Atkins*, pointing out the significance of social and psychological underdevelopment. Accordingly, the Article begins by decomposing the diagnostic category of retardation into specific dimensions of underdevelopment. Second, the Article analyzes the correspondence of these dimensions of underdevelopment among the retarded to legal standards about immaturity and culpability of adolescents. If children are in fact less “formed” developmentally than adults, they lack full capacity and therefore are “less culpable” than adults. But what characteristics define immaturity among adolescents, and how do these mirror the incapacities of retarded adults? Finally, the Article addresses both the convergence of the two vectors of underdevelopment, and the difficulty of establishing reliable chronological markers when such capacities attain. A substantial number of adolescents sentenced to death for crimes committed before age 18 will reflect a pattern of developmental and cognitive incapacities that place them well below the threshold of culpability that also exempts the mentally retarded under *Atkins*. Death penalty jurisprudence suggests that sentencing these persons to death invites the risk of serious error. These issues all highlight the conflict between normative and social science considerations of maturity, capacity and development, which both further complicate the extension of *Atkins* to adolescents and present challenges for the imminent debate about the executions of minors.

¹⁸ 492 US 361 (1989)

¹⁹ See, *Atkins* at 2250, and *infra* note 237.

II. THE JURISPRUDENCE OF RETARDATION

A. Penry and the Culpability of Mentally Retarded People

In *Penry v. Lynaugh* the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the Eighth Amendment did not categorically prohibit the execution of mentally retarded people convicted of capital offenses.²⁰ Johnny Paul Penry had been convicted of the brutal rape and murder of Pamela Carpenter in her home in Livingston, Texas, in October 1979. A clinical psychologist had testified at a competency hearing before trial that Penry was mentally retarded with an IQ of 54.²¹ The psychologists testified that Penry had the mental age of a 6 ½ year old, that his ability to function socially with the world was also that of a nine- or ten-year old, that he suffered from moderate retardation that led to poor impulse control and an inability to learn from his own experiences, and that it was impossible for him to appreciate the wrongfulness of his conduct or to change his own behavior to conform to the law due to organic brain damage he had suffered as a child.²²

The Supreme Court's discussion of the treatment of mentally retarded persons in *Penry* focused primarily on "idiots" and "lunatics" in common law.²³ In tracing the common law prohibition against punishing "idiots" and "lunatics," the Court quotes Blackstone who wrote:

The second case of a deficiency in will, which excuses from the guilt of crimes, arises also from a defective or vitiated understanding, viz. in an *idiot* or a *lunatic*. . . . [I]diots and lunatics are not chargeable for their own acts, if committed when under these incapacities: no, not even for treason itself. . . . [A] total idiocy, or absolute insanity, excuses from the guilt, and of course from the punishment, of any criminal action committed under such deprivation of the senses. . . .²⁴

The Court also quoted Hale on the culpability of a man born deaf and mute who, "...is in presumption of law an idiot . . . because he hath no possibility to understand what

²⁰ 492 US 302 at 280 (1989).

²¹ This would place Penry in either the category of "mild" retardation (individuals with an IQ score range of 50-55 and 70) or "moderate" retardation (IQ scores in the range of 35-40 to 50-55), according to the AAMR classifications. See, *Mental Retardation: Definition, Classification, and Systems of Supports* 5 (9th ed. 1992), quoted in *Atkins* at 2245.

²² *Penry v. Lynaugh*, supra note 20 at 2937.

²³ *Id.* at 286.

²⁴ W. Blackstone, 4 Commentaries 24 -- 25 (emphasis in original), quoted at 286.

is forbidden by law to be done, or under what penalties: but if it can appear, that he hath the use of understanding, . . . then he may be tried, and suffer judgment and execution." ²⁵ Having generally established mental retardation as a factor that may reduce one's culpability for a criminal act, the Court addressed the issue of whether, because of their diminished culpability, the imposition of capital punishment on individuals with mental retardation would be unconstitutional under the Eighth Amendment's protection against "cruel and unusual punishment". After reviewing state statutes, the Court held that no national consensus had emerged on the issue and that procedural safeguards that allowed sentencers to consider mitigating factors would allow for an individualized determination to be made in every case. Relying on a publication of the American Association on Mental Retardation (AAMR) that described the mentally retarded as "a heterogeneous population, ranging from totally dependant to nearly independent people," the Court stated:

In light of the diverse capacities and life experiences of mentally retarded persons, it cannot be said on the record before us today that all mentally retarded people, by definition, can never act with the level of culpability associated with the death penalty." (at 338, 339).

Rejecting a categorical exclusion, and acknowledging that mentally retarded individuals suffer from an impairment of certain cognitive abilities, the Court still held that the degree of culpability possessed by *Penry* and a class of individuals with similar abilities was adequate to justify the imposition of the death penalty.²⁶

B. The Cognitive and Developmental Components of Mental Retardation

Thirteen years after *Penry*, the Supreme Court granted certiorari in *Atkins v. Virginia*,²⁷ and once again addressed the question of whether the imposition of capital

²⁵ M. Hale, *Pleas of the Crown* 34 (1736) quoted at 287.

²⁶ Writing for the majority, Justice O'Connor stated that: "...retardation has long been regarded as a factor that may diminish culpability, and, in its most severe form, may result in complete exculpation.... Mentally retarded persons, however, are individuals whose abilities and behavioral deficits can vary greatly depending on the degree of their retardation, their life experience, and the ameliorative effects of education and habilitation. On the present record, it cannot be said that all mentally retarded people of petitioner's ability--by virtue of their mental retardation alone, and apart from any individualized consideration of their personal responsibility--inevitably lack the cognitive, volitional, and moral capacity to act with the degree of culpability associated with the death penalty. Moreover, the concept of "mental age" is an insufficient basis for a categorical Eighth Amendment rule, since it is imprecise, does not adequately account for individuals' varying experiences and abilities, [and] ceases to change after a person reaches the chronological age of 15 or 16...." *Penry*, *supra* note 20, at 306.

²⁷ 122 S.Ct. 2242 (2002)

punishment on mentally retarded people was unconstitutional. In *Atkins*, however, the Court overturned the *Penry* decision citing among other factors the emergence of a national consensus against the execution of mentally retarded people. The Court stated that “the consistency of the direction of change” among the state legislative enactments on the issue “provides powerful evidence that today our society views mentally retarded offenders as categorically less culpable than the average criminal.”²⁸ Note 21 in *Atkins* elaborated upon the positions taken by professional and religious organizations and even foreign nations to evidence a “broader social and professional consensus.”²⁹ These positions focused on both subaverage general intellectual functioning (i.e., low IQ) and significant limitations in social and interpersonal behaviors broadly categorized as “adaptive functioning.”

1. IQ as a Focal Marker of Retardation

The Supreme Court in *Atkins* initially cited a series of narrow definitions that focused heavily on IQ as a marker of retardation. For example, the American Association on Mental Retardation (AAMR) definition states:

Mental retardation refers to substantial limitations in present functioning. It is characterized by significantly subaverage intellectual functioning, existing concurrently with related limitations in two or more of the following applicable adaptive skill areas: communication, self-care, home living, social skills, community use, self-direction, health and safety, functional academics, leisure, and work. Mental retardation manifests before age 18.³⁰

The American Psychiatric Association’s definition also was presented in *Atkins* :

The essential feature of Mental Retardation is significantly subaverage general intellectual functioning (Criterion A) that is accompanied by significant limitations in adaptive functioning in at least two of the following skill areas: communication, self-care, home living, social/interpersonal skills, use of community resources, self-direction, functional academic skills, work, leisure, health, and safety (Criterion B). The onset must occur before age 18 years (Criterion C). Mental Retardation has many different

²⁸ Id. at 2249

²⁹ Id. at 2249

³⁰ Mental Retardation: Definition, Classification, and Systems of Supports 5 (9th ed. 1992), quoted in *Atkins* at 2245.

etiologies and may be seen as a final common pathway of various pathological processes that affect the functioning of the central nervous system.³¹

The World Health Organization, whose International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (tenth revision) enjoys greater acceptance internationally, also focuses on IQ in its definition of mental retardation:³²

Degrees of mental retardation are conventionally estimated by standardized intelligence tests. These can be supplemented by scales assessing social adaptation in a given environment.³³

The emphasis on intelligence noted here has been pervasive in statutory definitions of mental retardation. Virtually every state statute that prohibits the execution of “mentally retarded” persons, defines such a condition as “a mental deficit that has resulted in significantly subaverage general intellectual functioning existing concurrently with significant limitations in adaptive functioning, where the onset of the forgoing conditions occurred before the defendant reached the age of eighteen.”³⁴ In addition, about one-third of the states have set a maximum numerical IQ level for a mentally retarded individual - nearly all use a threshold of 70).³⁵

³¹ American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* 41, 41-49 (4th ed. 2000).

³² World Health Organization, *International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (Tenth Revision) (ICD-10)* 91, 91-93 (1999).

³³ *Id.* at 91.

³⁴ See, for example, *Ariz. Rev. Stat. § 13-3982*. All statutes prohibiting the death penalty for people with mental retardation can be found at: <http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/dpicmrstatutes.html>; Last Accessed October 1, 2002.

³⁵ See, James W. Ellis, *Mental Retardation And The Death Penalty: A Guide To State Legislative Issues*. Most of the existing state legislation on this topic define mental retardation in general terms, as “concurrent deficits in adaptive behavior,” but also generally apply the definition to persons with an IQ score of 70 or below, and additionally some individuals with scores in the low 70s (and even mid-70s), depending on the nature of the testing information. See, for example, *See, e.g., TENN. CODE ANN. § 39-13-203(a)(1)-(3)* (1997); *WASH. REV. CODE ANN. § 10.95.030(2)(a)* (West Supp. 2002). However, the identification of the upper boundary of mental retardation cannot be stated with complete precision in terms of IQ scores. This upper boundary of IQs to classify a person as mentally retarded reflects the statistical variance inherent in all intelligence tests and the need to accommodate clinical judgment. *AAMD, Classification* (1983) 11 (AThis upper limit is intended as a guideline; it could be extended upward through IQ 75 or more, depending on the reliability of the intelligence test used. This particularly applies in schools and similar settings if behavior is impaired and clinically determined to be due to deficits in reasoning and judgment@); *APA, DSM-IV-TR* at 41-42 (AThus it is

The clinical, scientific and normative issues regarding the culpability of mentally retarded individuals did not evolve much in the years between the *Penry* and *Atkins* decisions. No major advancements in the classification of mental retardation had been reported in the intervening time, and IQ remained the focal point in clinical and statutory definitions of mental retardation. The Court's reasoning in *Atkins* was focused more on the normative consensus emerging in the states and less on changing professional views of the capacities of individuals whose IQ hovers at the widely recognized threshold of 70. However, the emphasis on IQ masks important developmental competencies that are concomitants of mental retardation, and that form the scientific and conceptual basis for extending the inner logic of *Atkins* to adolescents. This dimensionality is examined next.

2. The Dimensionality of Mental Retardation

The Court in *Atkins* recognized the limitations of a narrow and singular definition of mental retardation, and invoked a definition more consistent with the Eighth Amendment jurisprudence of *Enmund*, *Woodson*, *Coker* and other cases. Despite the hegemony of IQ as a marker of retardation in both clinical practice and state law, *Atkins* went beyond the normative consensus to articulate a jurisprudence of mental retardation that bears directly on the culpability of mentally retarded persons (MRP's) for criminal sanctions generally. The Court then goes on to locate their culpability relative to the higher capital standard set by *Endmund* and other cases that constitute the "death is different" capital jurisprudence.

Unlike *Penry*, which relied upon the "idiots' and 'lunatics'" jurisprudence of the common law, the characterizations of retardation in *Atkins* relied upon not just clinical definitions of mental retardation but ranged wider to embrace social science evidence that establish characteristics of mental retardation. That is, the Court coupled the extrinsic sociopolitical *consensus* argument with a second more descriptive and straight-forward approach: invoking justice. By relying on simple biological and psychological arguments to

possible to diagnose Mental Retardation in individuals with IQs between 70 and 75 who exhibit significant deficits in adaptive behavior@). See generally, American Psychological Association, *Manual of Diagnosis and Professional Practice in Mental Retardation* (John W. Jacobson & James A. Mulick eds. 1996); National Research Council, *Mental Retardation: Determining Eligibility for Social Security Benefits* 5 (National Academy Press 2002). Despite the desirability of a bright line standard measurable by a single IQ test, Ellis says that other factors must be considered to inform and contextualize the clinical judgment of experienced diagnosticians. This fact is reflected in the *Atkins* decision, where the Court noted that "...an IQ between 70 and 75 is typically considered the cutoff IQ score for the intellectual function prong of the mental retardation definition." 122 S.Ct. at 2245 n.5.

explain why mentally retarded individuals should not be held to the same standards of culpability as fully developed adults, the *Atkins* Court makes an important statement about the role of accountability in capital cases.

At the fulcrum of this discussion are the dynamics of social and mental development. The court posits that,

Because of their disabilities in areas of reasoning, judgment, and control of their impulses. . . [mentally retarded persons] do not act with the level of moral culpability that characterizes the most serious adult criminal conduct. Moreover, their impairments can jeopardize the reliability and fairness of capital proceedings against [them].³⁶

This reasoning presupposes a fundamental point: mentally retarded individuals are not as psychologically, mentally, and socially developed as normal adults, and therefore do not display the same abilities of reason or culpability. There are several steps to take in arguing for this logical progression by the Court. The first and most important is to examine the various definitions of “mental retardation” found in law, medicine, and psychology to ascertain a more comprehensive understanding of what is essential in demarcating a mentally retarded individual from an average adult. Turn again to the Court’s own words. The *Atkins* Court instructs:

Mentally retarded persons frequently know the difference between right and wrong and are competent to stand trial. Because of their impairments, however, by definition they have diminished capacities to understand and process information, to communicate, to abstract from mistakes and learn from experience, to engage in logical reasoning, to control impulses, and to understand the reactions of others. There is no evidence that they are more likely to engage in criminal conduct than others, but there is abundant evidence that they often act on impulse rather than pursuant to a premeditated plan, and that in group settings, they are followers rather than leaders.³⁷

³⁶ *Atkins* at 2250.

³⁷ *Id.* at 2250 and Notes 23 and 24. The Court cited social science evidence on this point: J. McGee & F. Menolascino, *The Evaluation of Defendants with Mental Retardation in the Criminal Justice System*, in *THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM AND MENTAL RETARDATION* 55, 58-60 (R. Conley, R. Luckasson, & G. Bouthilet eds.1992); Appelbaum & Appelbaum, *Criminal-Justice Related Competencies in Defendants with Mental Retardation*, 14 *J. of Psychiatry & L.* 483, 487-489 (Winter 1994); Ellis & Luckasson, [Mentally Retarded Criminal Defendants](#), 53 *Geo. Wash. L.Rev.* 414, 429 (1985); Levy-Shiff, Kedem, & Sevilia, *Ego Identity in Mentally Retarded Adolescents*, 94 *AM. J.*

The logic seems self-evident: because of a stall in mental and social development, these individuals are biologically more vulnerable to outside influence, to acting on impulse, and to not thinking through the consequences of their actions. *Atkins* specifically references characteristics common to both the mentally retarded and juveniles: a susceptibility to influence, a lack of maturity and perspective, and a lower degree of moral culpability.³⁸ The Court concluded that these deficiencies may not exempt mentally retarded persons from criminal sanctions, but they do diminish the culpability well below the constitutional threshold for a death sentence.³⁹

For example, adopting the recommendations of the Utah Sentencing Commission,⁴⁰ the Utah legislature recently passed SB 8, incorporating the *Atkins* decision into Utah law,⁴¹ and the Governor signed it into law on March 15, 2003. The bill sets up a procedure to make the mental retardation determination before trial. A defendant found mentally retarded could still be tried for murder, but could not be subjected to the death penalty. IQ is only one of many factors to be considered in classifying a person as mentally retarded.⁴² The definition in Utah's proposed law reads that a person would be regarded as mentally retarded if the individual "has significantly subaverage general intellectual functioning that results in and exists concurrently with significant deficits in adaptive functioning in the areas of reasoning, judgment and impulse control, manifested prior to age 22."⁴³

The Utah statute also states that a person's IQ should not be the only determining factor since different IQ tests produce different results, since IQ often is considered a range

MENTAL RETARDATION 541, 547 (1990); Whitman, *Self Regulation and Mental Retardation*, 94 Am.J. MENTAL RETARDATION 347, 360 (1990); Everington & Fulero, *Competence to Confess: Measuring Understanding and Suggestibility of Defendants with Mental Retardation* 37 MENTAL RETARDATION 212, 212-213, 535 (1999).

³⁸ These characteristics were defined for juveniles below the age of 18 in *Eddings v. Oklahoma*, 455 U.S. 104, 113-117, 102 S.Ct. 869, 71 L.Ed.2d 1 (1982); See, generally, Elizabeth Scott, *Judgment and Reasoning of Adolescents*, infra note 78.

³⁹ *Atkins* at 2250-51.

⁴⁰ See, Utah Sentencing Commission Minutes, Committee: Sentencing Committee, October 9, 2002 (available at <http://www.justice.utah.gov/MinutesAgendas/sentmin/October.pdf>, visited April 15, 2003).

⁴¹ U.C.A. 1953 § 76-2-305, amended by [2003 Utah Laws Ch. 11 \(S.B. 08\)](#) (March 15, 2003).

⁴² *Id.*

⁴³ S.B. 8, Utah Senate, § **77-15a-102**: "Mentally retarded defined. As used in this chapter, a defendant is "mentally retarded" if: (1) the defendant has significant subaverage general intellectual functioning that results in and exists concurrently with significant deficiencies in adaptive functioning that exist primarily in the areas of reasoning or impulse control, or in both of these areas; and (2) the subaverage general intellectual functioning and the significant deficiencies in adaptive functioning under Subsection (1) are both manifested prior to age 22."

rather than a fixed number, and using the traditional IQ of 70 would be both overinclusive and underinclusive. The statute further states that the signs of retardation should have emerged before age 22, although there was sharp internal division within the Commission over this provision. Finally, the statute recommended that the death penalty should not be sought against a mentally impaired person who confesses to a crime unless there is outside corroborating evidence. The statute prohibits a death sentence if a case revolves only around a confession from a person with a sub-average intellect that is not corroborated by other evidence.

However, Utah may be atypical where it focuses on markers other than IQ to determine degrees of mental retardation. Many current statutes in other states require two necessary elements to declare a defendant mentally retarded: low intellectual functioning and subnormal adaptive behavior.⁴⁴ These statutes typically define a broad definition for each of these requirements. Most states, however, set the intellectual functioning standard at a specified IQ level (70 or 75), or they leave the evaluation in the hands of a court appointed psychologist. And, some states have not provided any definition for the adaptive behavior prong of mental retardation, leaving it open to court interpretation. South Dakota and Tennessee are examples of states using this approach.⁴⁵ Many states have taken steps to define the “adaptive behavior” element. Arizona, Connecticut, and Kansas are virtually identical in their wording in this respect.⁴⁶ North Carolina and Missouri provide more comprehensive definitions of each component of the definition. For example, Missouri statutes decompose adaptive behavior into specific components: “. . .communication, self-care, home living, social skills, community use, self-direction, health and safety, functional academics, leisure and work, which conditions are manifested and documented before eighteen years of age.”⁴⁷

While there are some differences in defining the "adaptive behavior" prong of

⁴⁴ All statutes prohibiting the death penalty for people with mental retardation can be found at: <http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/dpicmrstatutes.html>, visited October 1, 2002.

⁴⁵ For example, Tennessee statutes are typical in drawing a bright line for IQ, but leaving vague the criteria for determining “adaptive” behavior. The issue of age of determination attests to the dimension of stability that informs several statutes, an inherent claim of the intractability and organic nature of the disability. “(a) As used in this section, ‘mental retardation’ means: (1) Significantly subaverage general intellectual functioning as evidenced by a functional intelligence quotient (I.Q.) of seventy (70) or below; (2) Deficits in adaptive behavior; and (3) The mental retardation must have been manifested during the developmental period, or by eighteen (18) years of age” *Tenn. Code. Ann. Tit. 39. Ch 13*.

⁴⁶ The Connecticut statute defines subaverage functioning as: “[s]ignificantly subaverage general intellectual functioning existing concurrently with deficits in adaptive behavior and manifested during the developmental period”; and adaptive behavior “. . .means the effectiveness or degree with which an individual meets the standards of personal independence and social responsibility expected for the individual's age and cultural group.” *Conn. Gen. Stat. § 1-1g (2001)*

⁴⁷ *Section 565.030 R.S.Mo*

mental retardation among the various statutes on point, each state with such a definition includes one common element: the defendant lacks independence and social responsibility in relationship to others in that community or cultural group. Only the Utah statute thus far has taken the additional step to incorporate specific markers of developmental incapacities into a definition of mental retardation. Social science, and especially developmental psychology, has taken note of the specific dimensions of adaptive behavior, generally offering a broader definition that includes: (a) initiating, interacting and terminating interaction with others; (b) regulating one's own behavior and controlling impulses; (c) making choices; and (d) conforming conduct to laws.⁴⁸ In this regard, the states' statutes lag well behind the social science evidence on the cognitive, emotional regulatory, and neuropsychological deficits that comprise retardation.⁴⁹

3. The Culpability of Mentally Retarded Offenders in Capital Cases

The Court in *Atkins* stated that "... *only the most deserving of execution* are put to death...If the culpability of the average murderer is insufficient to justify the most extreme sanction available to the State, the lesser culpability...surely does not merit that form of retribution." (emphasis added). Accordingly, even if a mentally retarded murderer does not meet the strict statutory requirements of being "significantly subaverage" in their intellectual and adaptive abilities, he or she are sufficiently subaverage on the dimensions of "adaptive behavior" to substantially challenge the assertion that a mentally retarded person should ever be considered one of "the most deserving of execution."

The bridge between legal responsibility and moral responsibility can be understood at the intersection of the two purported goals of the criminal justice system, punishment and deterrence. A minimum amount of cognitive understanding is necessary for either goal to be served in any measurable manner. If the defendant is so mentally retarded that he has no understanding of right and wrong or does not have the memory capacity to recollect the crime for which he is being held accountable, then we can assume that he will not be able appreciate the relationship between his action and the punishment. Also, other similarly situated individuals, lacking the same cognitive abilities, will not have the mental capacity to

48 See Alan S. Kaufman, *Assessing Adolescent and Adult Intelligence* (1990) at 549 for a discussion of adaptive skills. See also Jacobson, John W. and James A Mulick, eds, *Manual of Diagnosis and Professional Practice in Mental Retardation* (1996), at 27.

49 See, generally, McGee, Appelbaum and Appelbaum, *supra* n. 18. See, also, A.K. Dowling, *Post-Atkins Problems with Enforcing the Supreme Court's Ban on Executing the Mentally Retarded*, 33 *Seton Hall L. Rev.* 733 (2003); Note, *Implementing Atkins*, 116 *Harv. L. Rev.* 2565 (2003).

understand the crime-punishment relationship or control their actions to conform to social norms. By most clinical definitions, a mentally retarded person's capacity is permanently frozen at a particular mental age.⁵⁰ Thus, if an individual lacks the capacity to make a moral judgment about right and wrong and alter their actions in accordance with their moral judgment, then it serves no function to place moral blame and punishment upon that actor.

In *Atkins*, the Court stated two significant reasons for disallowing the execution of mentally retarded offenders. First, given the characteristics of their disability, mentally retarded people are not uniquely culpable under the law. Where the Court in *Gregg* identified retribution and deterrence as the social purposes served by the death penalty,⁵¹ there is substantial doubt about whether retribution in cases involving the mentally retarded is best served by executing them. In *Godfrey v. Georgia*, for example, the Court set aside a death penalty because the crimes did not reflect a consciousness materially more "depraved than that of any person guilty of murder."⁵² Indeed, the *Atkins* Court similarly recognized that mentally retarded persons have diminished capacity to understand and process information, to communicate, to abstract from mistakes and learn from experience, and to control impulses.⁵³ Accordingly, the Court adopted a functionalist perspective, arguing that the application of capital punishment to mentally retarded offenders did not serve the retribution goal of matching the severity of the punishment to the crime.

The *Atkins* Court also held that mentally retarded persons are unlikely to realize a deterrent effect of capital jurisprudence. Explaining that the same cognitive impairments which classify individuals as mentally retarded also interfere with their ability to understand the law, the Court held that the deterrent effect of possible capital punishment is essentially lost prospective mentally retarded offenders.

[I]t is the same cognitive and behavioral impairments that make these defendants less morally culpable -- for example, the diminished ability to

⁵⁰ American Association on Mental Retardation, *Mental Retardation: Definition, Classification, and Systems of Supports* 1 (Ruth Luckasson ed., 10th ed. 2002) (hereafter AAAMR, *Mental Retardation* (2002)). In addition to providing the current definition of mental retardation and explaining related concepts and terminology, the 2002 edition of this manual provides valuable background on such topics as the history of classification, clinical assessment of people with mental retardation, and an extensive bibliography of references to the clinical literature. See www.aamr.org. The formulation in the 2002 AAMR definition requires that the individual manifest a disability characterized by significant limitations both in intellectual functioning and in adaptive behavior as expressed in conceptual, social, and practical adaptive skills." Id. Any behavioral adjustments or changes over time by mentally retarded persons do not signify improvements in mental functioning, but reflect only the ability to overcome "adaptive limitations" from life experience/habit. Id.

⁵¹ *Gregg v. Georgia*, 428 U.S. 153 (1976)

⁵² 446 US 420 (1980)

⁵³ *Atkins*, at 2250.

understand and process information, to learn from experience, to engage in logical reasoning, or to control impulses -- that also make it less likely that they can process the information of the possibility of execution as a penalty and, as a result, control their conduct based upon that information. Nor will exempting the mentally retarded from execution lessen the deterrent effect of the death penalty with respect to offenders who are not mentally retarded. Such individuals are unprotected by the exemption and will continue to face the threat of execution. Thus, executing the mentally retarded will not measurably further the goal of deterrence.⁵⁴

The Gregg Court relied on *Enmund v. Florida*, noting "... it seems likely that "capital punishment can serve as a deterrent only when murder is the result of premeditation and deliberation."⁵⁵ Citing *Fisher v U.S.*,⁵⁶ the Gregg Court continued to explain "...for if a person does not intend that life be taken or contemplate that lethal force will be employed by others, the possibility that the death penalty will be imposed for vicarious felony murder will not "enter into the cold calculus that precedes the decision to act."⁵⁷ Regarding the coupling of deterrence and retribution, the *Enmund* Court found that unless the death penalty contributes to one or both of these goals, capital punishment "is nothing more than the purposeless and needless imposition of pain and suffering," and hence an unconstitutional punishment.⁵⁸ Absent a consciousness not just of the moral wrong of murder, but of the aggravating conditions that qualify the case for death, the culpability of the average murderer is insufficient for the death penalty. Furthermore, if a mentally retarded person lacks the logical reasoning skills, the maturity, and the ability to think in long-range causal terms, as some argue, it is inconsistent to hold such a person to the higher standard of either legal responsibility or moral culpability required for a death sentence.

The Court next explained that the disabilities of the mentally retarded not only affect decision-making during the commission of their crimes, but also affect them after they have been apprehended and convicted. In this respect, the Court found that the same psychological and intellectual inferiority that leads to the poor decision to commit the act in the first place also "undermines the strength of the procedural protections that our capital jurisprudence steadfastly guards."⁵⁹ If an individual is more likely to be intimidated by authority, to be poor, to have a difficult time recounting events in great detail, and to act in a

54 *Atkins* at 2251

55 [458 U.S., at 798, 799, 102 S.Ct. 3368](#)

56 [Fisher v. United States, 328 U.S. 463, 484, 66 S.Ct. 1318, 1328, 90 L.Ed. 1382 \(1946\)](#)

57 [Gregg v. Georgia, supra, 428 U.S., at 186, 96 S.Ct., at 2931](#) (footnote omitted)

58 [Coker v. Georgia, supra, 433 U.S., at 592, 97 S.Ct., at 2866.](#)

59 *Atkins* at 2250.

manner beyond which his intellectual faculties can sustain him, the criminal process is likely to be an unjust burden.

Mentally retarded persons are, by definition, deficient in many of these areas, and are therefore at a distinct disadvantage in the capital process. In addition to holding that the goals of the death penalty were not furthered by the inclusion of the mentally retarded, the *Atkins* Court overruled *Penry*'s holding that consideration of mitigating factors by the sentencer will adequately ensure individualized consideration in determining a mentally retarded defendant's culpability. The diminished capacity of mentally retarded persons to competently participate in the trial process contributes to their higher risk of serious error in both the trial and sentencing phases of capital trials. It is not hard to imagine how a mentally retarded person might have lesser ability to make persuasive showing of mitigation. For example, citing recent exonerations involving false confessions and "the lesser ability of mentally retarded defendants to make a persuasive showing of mitigation," the Court stated that "[m]entally retarded defendants in the aggregate face a special risk of wrongful execution."⁶⁰

C. The Court's Role in Diagnosing Mental Retardation

Before the *Atkins* decision, mental retardation was considered as a mitigating factor to punishment in death penalty cases. If the level of mental retardation was not so severe as to affect the defendant's competency to stand trial, the courts were not required to make any special determinations or adopt any specific procedural standards when dealing with a defendant with "mild" or "moderate" mental retardation. Judges were not required to change their procedures to conform to the clinical definitions of mental retardation. Rather, juries were often presented with the testimony of expert witnesses who testified about both the IQ of defendants and their individual developmental characteristics.

In *Penry*, a clinical psychologist testified at a competency hearing before trial that Mr. Penry was mentally retarded with an IQ of 54.⁶¹ The psychologists testified that based on his evaluation, Mr. Penry had the mental age of a 6 ½ year old and that his ability to function socially with the world was also that of a 9- or 10-year old. However, Mr. Penry's moderate to mild levels of mental retardation did not weigh heavily enough in the eyes of the jury to prevent him from adequately representing his interests and the jury found Penry competent to stand trial.

⁶⁰ *Atkins*, at 2252

⁶¹ This would place Penry in either the category of "mild" retardation (individuals with an IQ score range of between 50 or 55 and 70), or "moderate" retardation (IQ scores in the range from a low of 35-40 to 50-55), according to the AAMR classifications.

At trial, Penry's attorneys raised an insanity defense (one alternative for mentally retarded defendants who are not so severely impaired as to be deemed unable to stand trial) and the testimony of another psychiatrist was introduced. The psychiatrist testified that the defendant suffered from moderate retardation that led to poor impulse control and an inability to learn from his own experiences. In addition, the psychiatrist testified because of the organic brain damage Mr. Penry suffered at an early age, it was impossible for him to appreciate the wrongfulness of his conduct or to change his own behavior to conform to the law.

The State presented testimony of two psychiatrists in rebuttal. One psychiatrist testified that the defendant was not suffering from any mental defect or illness at the time of the crime, while the other testified that he had personally diagnosed Penry as mentally retarded in both 1973 and 1977, but that Mr. Penry was legally sane at the time of the crime. In the face of the dueling testimonies of the three psychiatrists, the jury rejected Mr. Penry's insanity defense and rendered a guilty verdict.

Good law during the *Penry* case did not require the jury to categorically exempt Mr. Penry from capital punishment simply by virtue of his mental retardation. Rather, the defense was permitted to present testimony about his mental development, such as his violent upbringing, that the jury would weigh along side other mitigating factors. Accordingly, in this case, the jury was allowed to consider the testimony of different expert witnesses who delivered competing testimony supporting claims that the defendant was or was not mentally retarded. Given the inconsistency of the psychological evaluations, the jury chose not to heavily weigh Mr. Penry's mental development.

In most cases, prosecuting attorneys tend to use this ambiguity to their advantage. In *Wills v. Texas*, the prosecuting attorney was quoted during closing of the original trial as urging the jury not to "have any sympathy for the defendant because he's a little slow or he's borderline mentally retarded . . . Don't say 'Poor Old Bobby Joe, he's a little slow, he's borderline mentally retarded. Let's give him a break.'"⁶²

As the dueling expert witnesses in *Penry* show, there is considerable disagreement among mental health professionals when rendering a diagnosis of mental retardation in individual cases. Historically, the courts have not been required to resolve questions about a defendant's possible mental retardation. Rather, the role of the courts has been to provide a forum for the presentation of multiple diagnoses. Although this apparent inconsistency in the reliability of mental retardation diagnoses has made its way into the courtroom, the lack of a categorical exemption for people with mental retardation has temporarily provided a way for the criminal justice system to avoid addressing the threshold question of exactly when someone is mentally retarded. As in *Penry*, the challenge of

62 511 US 1097 (1994) (citing Pet. For Cert. 10).

understanding a defendant's mental condition has been pushed onto the jury, consistent with the recent Supreme Court decision in *Apprendi v. New Jersey*⁶³ and *Ring v. Arizona*.⁶⁴ This becomes a very difficult task, however, where ordinary citizens are forced to evaluate the mental development of a defendant in situations where reasonable mental health professionals themselves disagree.

The Supreme Court's decision in *Atkins* has fundamentally changed the order in which this inquiry will occur. By granting a categorical exemption from capital punishment to people who are mentally retarded, the threshold question of exactly who qualifies as "mentally retarded" now looms before the Court. Although the actual process by which this will occur will develop cumulatively in individual cases over time, judges and juries will have to answer this question in a definitive manner.⁶⁵

Presently, there are two paths the criminal justice system can take in creating a legal threshold for mental retardation. First, the clinical definitions of mental retardation are well established, and these definitions may be accepted wholesale. Here, the advantages are three-fold. One advantage is that clinical definitions already exist and are in wide circulation. Examples include definitions offered by the AAMR, the APA in its publication the DSM-IV and the WHO in its publication the ICD-10.⁶⁶ A second advantage is that the scientific method is used when conducting clinical evaluations. This is a widely accepted analytic method and enjoys broad acceptance both by the judiciary and prospective jurors. Lastly, the scientific research underlying clinical definitions endows these classifications with a certain amount of legitimacy. Where dueling expert witnesses testify, however, a court would nonetheless be faced with a credibility determination.

The second path the courts may take is creating a legal definition of mental retardation, perhaps to be determined in a separate hearing much the like modern pre-trial

⁶³ 530 U.S. 466, 490 (2001). In *Apprendi*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that "any fact that increases the penalty for a crime beyond the prescribed statutory maximum, *other than the fact of a prior conviction*, must be submitted to a jury and proved beyond a reasonable doubt." As a matter of due process, any fact that might lead to an enhanced sentence that would increase the maximum penalty may be found by a jury using a reasonable doubt standard.

⁶⁴ 536 U.S. 584 (2002). *See, also, infra* notes 70-72

⁶⁵ See, John H. Blume and Pamela Blume Leonard, Principles of Developing and Presenting Evidence of Mental Retardation, __ *The Champion* (2000). The Court's decision in *Atkins* makes clear that its holding extends to all defendants who fall within the range of mentally retarded offenders about whom there is a national consensus. *Atkins*, 536 U.S. at 347-8. This means that while states are free to adopt variations in the wording of the definition, they cannot adopt a definition that encompasses a smaller group of defendants, nor may they fail to protect any individuals who have mental retardation under the definition embodied in the national consensus. Both judge and jury will have significant roles in the determination of whether a defendant is mentally retarded. *See, Ring v. Arizona*, 536 U.S. 584 (2002).

⁶⁶ AAMR's definition is most widely accepted within the United States, but the WHO's definition is most widely used internationally.

competency hearings. The obvious criticism that would arise is that lawyers and judges are endowing themselves with ability to make psychiatric diagnoses. This would create a problem similar to what existed when juries were allowed to independently weigh mental retardation as a mitigating factor.

The Court in *Atkins* offered an analysis of the value of clinical definitions of mental retardation when imported into the world of criminal culpability:

[C]linical definitions of mental retardation require not only subaverage intellectual functioning, but also significant limitations in adaptive skills such as communication, self-care, and self-direction that became manifest before age 18. Mentally retarded persons frequently know the difference between right and wrong and are competent to stand trial. Because of their impairments, however, by definition they have diminished capacities to understand and process information, to communicate, to abstract from mistakes and learn from experience, to engage in logical reasoning, to control impulses, and to understand the reactions of others. [footnote omitted]. There is no evidence that they are more likely to engage in criminal conduct than others, but there is abundant evidence that they often act on impulse rather than pursuant to a premeditated plan, and that in group settings they are followers rather than leaders. [footnote omitted]. Their deficiencies do not warrant an exemption from criminal sanctions, but they do diminish their personal culpability.⁶⁷

The presentation of these clinical definitions provided the Court with objective clinical and medical criteria which it could rely upon for its analysis of reduced legal culpability. This language may prove to be a starting point for courts in choosing the path ahead.

Finally, *Ring v. Arizona*⁶⁸ raised additional questions as to whether the judge or the jury makes the determination whether the defendant is mentally retarded. *Ring* involved a Sixth Amendment challenge to Arizona's judge-sentencing capital punishment scheme. Defendant *Ring* argued that the Sixth Amendment requires that any finding of fact that makes a defendant eligible for the death penalty must be unanimously made by the jury beyond a reasonable doubt.⁶⁹ While *Ring* dealt specifically with statutory aggravating

⁶⁷ *Atkins*, at 2250.

⁶⁸ *Ring*, 536 U.S. 584.

⁶⁹ *Id.* at 597 n.4.

circumstances, it included “.factfinding[s] necessary to . . . put [a defendant] to death.”⁷⁰ Applying *Ring*, a mentally retarded defendant is now constitutionally ineligible for the death penalty.⁷¹ Since mental retardation is now a factual issue upon which a defendant’s eligibility for death turns, “that fact . . . must be found by a jury beyond a reasonable doubt”.⁷²

While *Ring* would seem to put the task of determining whether a defendant is mentally retarded into the jury’s hands, the trial judge also has a very important role to play.⁷³ In *Atkins*, the Court prohibited execution of the mentally retarded in part by recognizing that retarded persons suffer in litigating issues in front of juries, which in turn exposes them to “a special risk of wrongful execution.”⁷⁴ Trial courts are obligated to conduct hearings on the admission of evidence regarding the defendant’s possible mental retardation. Both the defense and the prosecution would have the opportunity to present evidence, including expert testimony. After considering the evidence, the court should find the defendant to be not death eligible if it finds, by a preponderance of the evidence, that the defendant has mental retardation.⁷⁵ If the defendant is found to be not death eligible because of mental retardation, the trial could proceed as a non-capital trial, and, if convicted, the defendant could be sentenced to any penalty available under state law, other than death. If, on the other hand, the court finds that the defendant is not mentally retarded, and thus potentially eligible for the death penalty, the case could proceed as a capital trial.⁷⁶

⁷⁰ *Id.* at 609.

⁷¹ *Atkins*, 536 U.S. at 321.

⁷² *Ring*, 36 U.S. at 600.

⁷³ See, generally, John H. Blume and Pamela Blume Leonard, Principles of Presenting Mental Health Evidence in Criminal Cases, at <http://dpa.state.ky.us/library/advocate/jan02/mentalh.html> (last visited September 24, 2003).

⁷⁴ *Atkins*, 536 U.S. at 320-21 (noting: (1) the difficulty a mentally retarded person may have in testifying; (2) the possibility that a mentally retarded person’s “. . . demeanor may create an unwarranted impression of lack of remorse;” and, (3) the possibility that the mental retardation evidence may enhance the likelihood that future dangerousness will be found by the jury).

⁷⁵ A Court could decide that the prosecution would have the burden of establishing that the defendant is not mentally retarded by a higher burden, e.g. clear and convincing evidence or beyond a reasonable doubt. While a higher burden may not be constitutionally *required* at this stage, it would serve to save the costs of going through a capital trial in cases where it is likely the jury will ultimately determine, using the constitutionally required higher standard, that the defendant is mentally retarded at step two. See, Blume and Leonard, *supra* note 73.

⁷⁶ As in *Jackson*, the bifurcated approach makes sense because its two prongs address two separate (although factually related) questions. The first, to be addressed by the judge, is the *legal* issue of whether the defendant is a person who is eligible for the death penalty. If the court does not find the defendant death-eligible because of mental retardation, it would be unconstitutional to proceed with a capital trial. The second inquiry, by the jury, is whether the prosecution has demonstrated that the defendant is *factually* an individual upon whom the death penalty may be imposed. Condemning a defendant to death who has properly raised the issue of mental retardation then becomes a contingent

Thus, both judge and jury participate in the determination of the classification of mental retardation, in effect constructing and administering a gate through which capital defendants must pass should the prosecution seek the death penalty.

D. Summary

The difficulty of operationalizing the dimensions of retardation into a reliable set of indicia for legal or even clinical decision making challenge the “bright line” jurisprudence that is implied by *Atkins*. More central to this article are the parallels in the construction of such indicia that are problematic in drawing a “bright line” threshold for retardation, with the complexity of the construct of maturity that underlies the legal construction of adolescence. An even more direct extension, implied by the comments of the three U.S. Supreme Court justices about adolescence and the death penalty, publicly stated shortly after the *Atkins* decision, is whether the developmental deficits of the mentally retarded apply to adolescents who commit murders and face execution. Do the deficits of retardation describe the developmental limitations of adolescents? The next section examines this question.

III. ADOLESCENCE, DEVELOPMENT AND CULPABILITY

A. The Social and Legal Construction of Childhood

[Y]outh is more than a chronological fact. It is a time and condition of life when a person may be most susceptible to influence and to psychological damage. Our history is replete with laws and judicial recognition that minors, especially in their earlier years, generally are less mature and responsible than adults.⁷⁷

Traditionally, many areas of law have recognized the unique status of children. The Common Law allowed for special treatment of children in almost all areas of law, including contracts, family law, criminal justice and numerous other fields of governmental regulation. It is nearly universal in the law to assume that children are immature, unable to protect

on the finding of a *fact* that is a necessary precondition to a capital sentence. *Ring*, 536 U.S. 584 (emphasis added).

⁷⁷ *Eddings v. Oklahoma*, 455 US 104 at 115 (1982)

themselves from others and from their own mistakes, and therefore are in need of adult supervision.⁷⁸ Their immaturity often is accompanied by dependencies on adults for basic survival needs, such as food, shelter, health care and education. As Professor Elizabeth Scott shows, two dimensions of immaturity – cognitive development and judgment – makes children incompetent to reason and make rational choices.⁷⁹ Children also are assumed to be plastic, and thus vulnerable to both influence and harm from others.

These disabilities – incompetence, vulnerability and dependency – are expressed in several areas of legal regulation: the right to vote, consent to medical procedures, drink alcohol, drive motor vehicles, accept employment, enter into contracts,⁸⁰ join the military, marry, and go to prison. Professor Scott points out that adolescents' First Amendment free speech rights – that is, their access to regulated speech as well as their rights to expression – are more limited than those of adults, in part, because the U.S. Supreme Court assumed that children may be vulnerable to potentially harmful effects of some forms of speech.⁸¹ Children are subject to curfews that would be unconstitutional for adults.⁸² This longstanding framework of legal regulation of adolescence suggests that both law and policy view children as a group whose unique traits and circumstances warrant a special protective and regulatory scheme.

Historically, there has been no definitive age for determining when children have attained the capacities to function as adults. Rather, externalities -- changes and developments in society -- often have had an effect on raising and lowering the age standard. That is, the assignment of age-specific competencies tends to reflect contemporary social constructions of adolescence. Just as the context and meaning of

78 See *gen.* Elizabeth Scott, Judgment and Reasoning in Adolescent Decisionmaking, 37 *Villanova L. Rev.* 1607 (1992); Franklin E. Zimring, CHANGING LEGAL WORLD OF ADOLESCENCE 36 (1982).

79 See generally, Elizabeth S. Scott, *The Legal Construction of Adolescence*, 29 *HOFSTRA L. REV.* 547, 558-62 (2000)

80 Minors are liable only on contracts for necessities. Under the traditional rule, minors can disaffirm other contracts, at their option, returning consideration in possession, but with no liability for use or damage. Under the modern (minority) rule, minors can disaffirm, but must compensate the contracting party for use or damage, unless overreaching by the other party is involved. See discussion in S. Davis, E. Scott, W. Wadlington, & C. Whitebread, *CHILDREN IN THE LEGAL SYSTEM* 101-6 (1997).

81 Thus, for example, the Supreme Court has held that the state can restrict children's access to obscene material that would be protected speech for adults, and that public school officials can censor material in school newspapers. *Ginsberg v. New York*, 390 U.S. 629 (1968) (upholding New York statute restricting sale of "obscene material" to minors); *Hazelwood School Dist. v. Kuhlmeier*, 484 U.S. 260 (1988) (upholding the prior restraint of a school newspaper);

82 Courts recognize that curfew ordinances would violate the rights of adults to move about in public, but uphold carefully tailored ordinances that are directed at juveniles. See, for example, *Schleifer v. City of Charlottesville*, 963 F. Supp. 534 (W.D. Va. 1997), *aff'd* 159 F.3d 843 (4th Cir. 1998).

adolescent behaviors shift, so too do the age boundaries for the corresponding behavior. For example, the moral panic surrounding teenage drunk driving animated a sudden and sharp increase in the minimum legal drinking age.⁸³ In the United States, the upward trend in the age of capacity for children has been linked to industrialization, growing societal wealth and an accompanying interest in education.⁸⁴ These developments have together contributed to the greater ability of American society to invest more resources in the education and upbringing of our youth.

The law has expressed the boundaries of childhood by setting categorical boundaries that reflect broad and sometimes changing norms in a series of age-specific competencies. These boundaries have anticipated and balanced the social need to integrate children into civil society with the need to protect them from concomitant harms. This is true even though such “bright line” rules may not exactly mirror the developmental age when children attain those functions. Scott suggests that there is little evidence that, in most contexts, the interests of adolescents are harmed by a regime of binary classification or bright line demarcating the attainment of adult competence.⁸⁵ These boundaries did, though, balance several objectives. Often, legal regulation that lowered or raised the threshold of legal adulthood served both a broader public interest and the interest of the adolescents who were classified as adults.⁸⁶ The granting of adult responsibility assumed

⁸³ According to [Goode & Ben-Yehuda](#), “A moral panic is characterised by the feeling, held by a substantial number of the members of a given society, that evil-doers pose a threat to the society and to the moral order as a consequence of their behaviour and, therefore, “something should be done” about them and their behaviour.” (p. 31). Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda, “The American Drug Panic of the 1980s,” in *MORAL PANICS: THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF DEVIANCE* 140 (1994). Evidence of an increase in traffic accidents related to alcohol in the late 1970s created pressure on state legislatures to raise the legal drinking age. From September 1976 through January 1983, sixteen states raised the legal age to 21. Then because of more pressure in 1984, the federal government enacted the Uniform Drinking Age Act and any states that did not raise the legal drinking age to 21 would receive reduced federal highway construction funds. See [23 U.S.C. § 158 \(Supp. IV 1999\)](#).

⁸⁴ Clement, *THE JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM* (2002).

⁸⁵ Scott, *Legal Construction of Adolescence*, supra n. 68 at 547. Professor Scott claims that the binary classification works well, regardless of whether behavior-specific boundaries depart from the reality of developmental maturity. Sharp boundaries provide a clear signal of the attainment of adult legal status, and by varying the age at which adult rights and duties are granted for different functions (drinking, driving, marriage, work, military service, consent to medical procedures, entering into contracts, freedom from curfew), adolescents transit from childhood to adulthood gradually, without creating an intermediate category for adolescence. *Id.* at 548.

⁸⁶ Scott, *id.* at 578. Perhaps the best counterfactual for gradualism in granting adult responsibilities is the case of abortion. In, the Supreme Court required that a minor be given the opportunity (through a hearing) to demonstrate her maturity and ability to make an autonomous decision. This judicial by-pass hearing prescribed in *Bellotti v. Baird* ([443 U.S. 622 \(1979\)](#)), created a quasi-judicial forum for a pregnant teenager to demonstrate that she should be allowed to make the

that enough children had reached the threshold age to tolerate the mistakes of the percentage who were granted the freedoms or responsibilities but who had not yet attained the developmental capacity by that age to perform that function well. In other words, "...legal policy facilitates the transition to adulthood through a series of bright line rules that reflect society's collective interest in young citizen's healthy development to productive adulthood."⁸⁷

B. A Brief History of the Doctrine of Diminished Culpability of Children

Establishing bright line thresholds for granting adult status and responsibility to adolescents has worked less well in the realm of adult criminal responsibility.

An examination of early English laws reveal that below a certain age threshold, usually age seven or so, children were considered to be incapable of criminal acts because they were incapable of forming the necessary element of criminal intent.⁸⁸ Although youth was not a complete excuse for criminal acts, the tender age of an offender often provided grounds for the commutation or elimination of punishment.⁸⁹ At the same time, for children aged seven and higher, there was a rebuttable presumption of incapacity. Generally, in early American colonial history, the burden was on the prosecution to overcome this presumption, however no exact standard of proof ever emerged.⁹⁰ Various courts over time had used differing terminology in their attempt to measure a child's culpability, including having "a guilty knowledge,"⁹¹ "fully aware of the nature and consequences of the act,"⁹² "plainly showed intelligent malice"⁹³ and "mentally capable of distinguishing between right and wrong."⁹⁴

By 1825, the first refuge was opened where children served sentences in a separate institution from adults.⁹⁵ Nonetheless, the juvenile justice system had not yet been

abortion decision without involving her parents, and is a central element of abortion regulation. In that context, Professor Scott notes the burdensome procedural requirements that create social and administrative costs involving parental notification and multiple visits, with little evidence that the welfare of adolescents is advanced through the creation of such an intermediate category of responsibility. *Id.* at 558.

⁸⁷ *Id.* at 577.

⁸⁸ 4 W. Blackstone, COMMENTARIES OF THE LAW OF ENGLAND 23-24 (1792); 1 M. Hale, PLEAS OF THE CROWN 25-28 (1682).

⁸⁹ Kean, *The History of the Criminal Liability of Children*, 53 L.Q.REV.364 (1937).

⁹⁰ *Godfrey v. State*, 31 Ala. 323 (1858).

⁹¹ *Watson v. Commonwealth*, 247 Ky. 336, 57 S.W.2d 39 (1933)

⁹² *Martin v. State*, 90 Ala. 602, 80 So. 858 (1891)

⁹³ *Miles v. State*, 99 Miss. 165, 54 So. 946 (1911)

⁹⁴ *Id.*

⁹⁵ David Rothman, CONSCIENCE AND CONVENIENCE (1980); Anthony Platt, CHILD SAVERS

established and children were still processed through the adult criminal court system.⁹⁶ Eventually, parental neglect began to be recognized as one of the causes of juvenile delinquency and destitution; this discovery animated the idea that children were to be reformed and not punished.⁹⁷

Beginning in 1899, Illinois began a nation-wide legislative movement that established separate jurisdiction for juvenile courts. The Juvenile Court institutionalized into law and procedure the notion that children who broke the law lacked the skills and maturity of adults, and that rehabilitative services could restore them toward maturity and a functional adult life.⁹⁸ The new juvenile courts built a jurisprudence and institutional structure around this new jurisprudence.⁹⁹ By the time the federal government passed the juvenile court act in 1938,¹⁰⁰ there existed a separate and distinct formalized judicial forum

(1969)

⁹⁶ Rothman, *Id.* at 10.

⁹⁷ Platt, *Id.*

⁹⁸ See, for example, Lamar Empey, *The Progressive Legacy and the Concept of Childhood*, in JUVENILE JUSTICE: THE PROGRESSIVE LEGACY AND CURRENT REFORMS 3 (1979), David Rothman, Rothman, *The Progressive Legacy: Development of American Attitudes Towards Juvenile Delinquency*, in JUVENILE JUSTICE: THE PROGRESSIVE LEGACY AND CURRENT REFORMS 34 (1979); Julian Mack, *The Juvenile Court*, 23 HARV. L. REV. 104 (1909). The creation of the juvenile courts modernized and institutionalized the notion of immaturity inherent in the infancy defense. See, Andrew Walkover, *The Infancy Defense in the New Juvenile Court*, 31 UCLA L. REV. 503, 510-12 (1984)

⁹⁹ In separating child from adult offenders, the juvenile court system also rejected the jurisprudence and procedure of adult criminal prosecutions. Courtroom procedures were modified to eliminate any implication of a criminal proceeding; a euphemistic vocabulary and a physically separate court building were introduced to avoid the stigma of adult prosecutions. To avoid stigmatizing a youth, hearings were confidential, access to court records limited, and children were found to be delinquent rather than guilty of committing a crime. Juvenile court proceedings concentrated on the child's background and welfare rather than the details surrounding the commission of a specific crime. See, for example, Anthony Platt, *THE CHILD SAVERS: THE INVENTION OF DELINQUENCY* (2d ed.) (1969); President's Comm'n On Law Enforcement And Admin. Of Justice, Task Force Report: Juvenile Delinquency And Youth Crime 92-93 (1967). The Juvenile Court movement rejected the punitive regime of the adult criminal justice system, favoring a flexible system where the court intervened paternalistically to identify the causes of delinquency and target services to cure these problems. By rejecting the formality of the adult courts, the Juvenile Court also made the proceedings confidential so as not to socially stigmatize young offender, excluded juries and lawyers from juvenile court proceedings, and rejected the rules of evidence and formal procedures for confronting witnesses.

¹⁰⁰ 18 U.S.C. §§ 5031-5037. Prior to 1938, there was no federal legislation providing for special treatment for juveniles. In 1938, the Federal Juvenile Delinquency Act was passed with the essential purpose of keeping juveniles apart from adult criminals. The original legislation provided juveniles with certain important rights including the right not to be sentenced to a term beyond the age of twenty-one. This early law also provided that an individual could be prosecuted as a juvenile delinquent only if the Attorney General in his discretion so directed. The 1938 Act gave the Attorney General the option to proceed against juvenile offenders as adults or as delinquents except with regard to those

and procedure for youthful offenders in every state.¹⁰¹ Even after the 1967 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Gault* allocated procedural rights to juveniles,¹⁰² including the right to counsel, the Court narrowly defined these rights to the judicial fact-finding hearing, continued to embrace the unique procedures for treating juveniles separately from adults, and rejected the right to a jury trial for juveniles.¹⁰³

Despite the juvenile court's flexibility in determining the causes of misconduct and its individualization of punishment, some juveniles were expelled from the juvenile court and their cases were transferred to criminal court, an act that attached the assumption of culpability to the adolescent offender and exposed them to criminal punishments.¹⁰⁴ These expulsions created a categorical status of adult culpability for those juvenile offenders. The expulsion – actually a waiver or transfer process – offered a method for the juvenile court to decide which adolescent offenders were sufficiently blameworthy to face adult punishment. These juveniles were deemed culpable as adults if their characters and behaviors merited the harsher conditions of punishment traditionally reserved for adults.¹⁰⁵

In *Kent v. United States*, the Supreme Court reviewed its first juvenile case.¹⁰⁶ Although the *Kent* decision preserved the waiver of juveniles into adult court, it also created a different standard of procedural reliability and fairness in juvenile cases. *Kent* held that children were entitled to representation by counsel, a hearing, and access to the information upon which the waiver decision was based, including a statement of the reasons supporting the transfer. In addition, the *Kent* Court set out a series of factors that the juvenile court judge was required to consider in making a waiver determination: the seriousness and type of offense; the manner in which the crime was committed; the maturity

allegedly committing offenses punishable by death or life imprisonment. The Juvenile Delinquency Act was amended in 1948, with few substantive changes.

¹⁰¹ Steven L. Schlossman, *LOVE AND THE AMERICAN DELINQUENT: THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF PROGRESSIVE JUVENILE JUSTICE, 1825-1920* (1977).

¹⁰² *In re Gault*, 387 U.S. 1, 14-17 (1967)

¹⁰³ *Id.* at 13 and 22. See, also, Barry C. Feld, *Other than the Fact of a Prior Conviction": Apprendi, Sentence Enhancements based on Delinquency Adjudications, and the Quality of Justice in Juvenile Courts*. MINN. L. REV. (in press).

¹⁰⁴ Scott, *Legal Construction of Adolescence*, *supra* note 79. See, also, David S. Tanenhaus, *The Evolution of Transfer Out of the Juvenile Court*, in *CHANGING BORDERS OF ADOLESCENCE* (Jeffrey Fagan and Franklin E. Zimring, eds.) 13 (2000); Franklin Zimring, *The Punitive Necessity of Waiver*, in *CHANGING BORDERS OF ADOLESCENCE*, *Id.* at 207; Fagan and Zimring, *Editors' Introduction*, *CHANGING BORDERS OF ADOLESCENCE*, *Id.* at 1.

¹⁰⁵ Franklin E. Zimring, *THE CHANGING LEGAL WORLD OF ADOLESCENCE* (1981); Barry C. Feld, *BAD KIDS: RACE AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE JUVENILE COURT* (1999); David S. Tanenhaus, *The Evolution of Transfer Out of the Juvenile Court*, in *CHANGING BORDERS OF ADOLESCENCE*, *Id.* at 13; Franklin Zimring, *The Punitive Necessity of Waiver*, in *CHANGING BORDERS OF ADOLESCENCE*, *Id.* at 207; Fagan and Zimring, *Editors' Introduction*, *CHANGING BORDERS OF ADOLESCENCE*, *id.* at 1.

¹⁰⁶ *Kent v. United States*, 383 US 542 (1966).

of the juvenile; the upbringing, home situation and lifestyle of the juvenile; his or her record and history and the possibility of rehabilitating the youth; and, concerns regarding the protection of the public.¹⁰⁷ Thus, the Court's initial protection of juveniles was weakened where after considering mitigating and aggravating circumstances, a court was nonetheless allowed to subject juveniles to the very same punishments as adults.

Following Kent, nearly every state has either lowered the age at which juveniles can be transferred to the juvenile court, or redistributed discretion to effect such waivers or transfers from judge to prosecutors on a case-by-case basis¹⁰⁸ or to legislatures via statutory exclusion,¹⁰⁹ or pursued both paths to criminalizing delinquency. Under current statutes, the states assign criminal liability to wrongdoing at no more than age 18, and most mark the age of responsibility at even younger ages for specific crimes.¹¹⁰ For some offenses and offenders, the threshold drops as low as 13 years of age in New York and 14 in California.¹¹¹

The categorical status of juveniles as culpable adults obscures the developmental realities of adolescence. Many commentators have noted the difficulty and social costs of this interstitial regime, and suggested a range of alternative standards and strategies for

¹⁰⁷ Id.

¹⁰⁸ Robert O. Dawson, *Judicial Waiver in Theory and Practice*, in CHANGING BORDERS OF ADOLESCENCE, Id at 45. See, also, Barry C. Feld, *The Juvenile Court Meets the Principle of the Offense: Legislative Changes in Juvenile Waiver Statutes*, 78 J. CRIM. L. & CRIMINOLOGY 471, 473-78 (1987).

¹⁰⁹ Barry C. Feld, *Legislative Exclusion of Offenses from Juvenile Court Jurisdiction: A History and Critique*, in THE CHANGING BORDERS OF JUVENILE JUSTICE: TRANSFER OF ADOLESCENTS TO THE CRIMINAL COURT (Jeffrey Fagan and Franklin E. Zimring, eds.) 83 (2000).

¹¹⁰ Patricia Torbet, Richard Gable, Hunter Hurst IV, Imogene Montgomery, Linda Szymanski, Douglas Thomas.. State Responses to Serious and Violent Juvenile Crime: Research Report. Washington, D.C.: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, National Center for Juvenile Justice (1996).

¹¹¹ See, for example, New York Juvenile Offender Law, enacted in 1978, mandates that 14 and 15 year olds indicted for any one of 15 felony offenses – 'JO eligible offenses' – and 13 year olds indicted for homicide, are excluded from family court and processed in criminal court. See, Merrill Sobie, *The Juvenile Offender Act: Effectiveness and Impact on the New York Juvenile Justice System*. 26 NEW YORK LAW SCHOOL LAW REVIEW 677 (1981). See, also, See, California Welfare and Institutions Code Section 707(a)(2), expanding the list of serious charges that will "automatically transfer" a juvenile who is over 14 years old to criminal court. Moreover, Section 18 lowers the age requirement for automatic transfers from 16 to 14, further increasing the number of juveniles who will be transferred to criminal court without any judicial determination. This expansion ultimately shifts the power to determine which court will judge an accused from the judge to the prosecutor, who has the unreviewable discretion to select the charge. For example, if the prosecutor charges manslaughter, the juvenile stays in the juvenile justice system; if the prosecution charges murder, the same conduct gets tried in criminal court.

conferring adult responsibility on adolescents who violate the criminal law.¹¹² But the reality of these laws is to expose a broad range of juveniles ages 16 and above to the option of capital punishment in cases of homicide.

C. Jurisprudence of the Juvenile Death Penalty

Executions of youths below the age of 18 in (what eventually became) the United States were recorded in the earliest colonial times.¹¹³ The number of executions remained very low until the resumption of executions following *Furman*¹¹⁴ in 1973. By 2002, at least 365 individuals in the U.S. had been executed for crimes they committed when they were juveniles, dating back to the first execution in 1642.¹¹⁵ Twenty-one of these 365 executions for juvenile crimes have been carried out during the current era (1973-2002), 2.6% of the total of 820 executions during this period.¹¹⁶ Almost two-thirds of the recent executions of juvenile offenders have occurred in Texas, with no other jurisdiction in the world actively involved in this practice.¹¹⁷ A total of 224 juvenile death sentences have been imposed since 1973, with Texas, Florida and Alabama accounting for half of them.¹¹⁸ Of these, 80 remain currently in force and still being litigated.¹¹⁹ Of the other 144 sentences finally resolved, 21 (15%) have resulted in execution and 123 (85%) have been reversed or

¹¹² Franklin E. Zimring and Jeffrey Fagan, *Transfer Policy and Law Reform*, in *THE CHANGING BORDERS OF JUVENILE JUSTICE: TRANSFER OF ADOLESCENTS TO THE CRIMINAL COURT*, Id. at 407, 408-413. See, also, Scott, *Legal Construction of Adolescence*, supra n. 68, at 581-586.

¹¹³ Robert D. Hale, *A REVIEW OF JUVENILE EXECUTIONS IN AMERICA* (1997). The first recorded execution of a juvenile (below age 18 at the time of execution) was in 1642, by the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The last occurred in 1957. Between those dates, 331 juveniles were executed. Juvenile executions reached unprecedented high numbers in the fifty years immediately following the Civil War.

¹¹⁴ 408 US 238 (1972). By 1967, the federal courts had imposed a prohibition on capital punishment so that a series of challenges to the principles and procedures could be decided.. In *Furman*, the court ruled that state laws that delegated to the jury the choice of execution or imprisonment for specific crimes without any clear guidelines were unconstitutional. States began passing laws that complied with *Furman* in 1973, culminating in the decision in *Gregg v. Georgia* (428 US 153 (1976)), which found that a jurisprudence of aggravating and mitigating circumstances in the commission of murders as weighed by the jury were acceptable structures for guiding a jury in the choice of death or imprisonment. See, Franklin E. Zimring, *THE CONTRADICTIONS OF AMERICAN CAPITAL PUNISHMENT* 8,9 (2003).

¹¹⁵ Victor L. Streib, [The Juvenile Death Penalty Today: Death Sentences and Executions for Juvenile Crimes, January 1, 1973 – June 30, 2002](http://www.law.onu.edu/faculty/streib). Available at <http://www.law.onu.edu/faculty/streib>.

¹¹⁶ Id

¹¹⁷ Id

¹¹⁸ Id

¹¹⁹ Id

commuted.¹²⁰ Among the 38 death penalty states, 19 set the minimum age at 16 years, 6 at age 17, and 13 set the age at 18.¹²¹

In practice, the execution of juveniles is either formally prohibited or a rare occurrence,¹²² a pattern acknowledging that young offenders are not fully responsible for their crimes, at least not to the extent of deserving the ultimate punishment.¹²³ The constitutionality of such a penalty, however, has come before the U.S. Supreme Court several times in recent years, most notably in the 1980s in *Eddings v. Oklahoma*,¹²⁴ *Thompson v. Oklahoma*,¹²⁵ and *Stanford v. Kentucky*.¹²⁶ The U.S. Supreme Court has not revisited this question since *Stanford* and the constitutionality of applying the death penalty to juvenile offenders appears to be settled.

Using Eighth Amendment jurisprudence, arguments were made in *Eddings*, *Thompson* and *Stanford* that, given the reduced culpability and capacity of juveniles, their execution was unconstitutionally harsh under the “*Cruel and Unusual*” clause. In his plurality opinion in *Thompson*, Justice Stevens focused on the immature judgment of adolescents in explaining why juvenile executions violate the principle of proportionality under the Eighth Amendment’s prohibition of cruel and unusual punishment:

¹²⁰ *Id*

¹²¹ In 2002, Indiana became the most recent state to raise the minimum age for death penalty eligibility to eighteen. [Ind. Code § 35-50-2-3 \(2002\)](#).

¹²² *Id*. See discussion of state statutes regulating juvenile death penalty in *Thompson v. Oklahoma* (487 U.S. 815 (1988)) and *Stanford v. Kentucky*, 492 U.S. 361 (1989). It is interesting to note that only a handful of other countries authorize the execution of juveniles.

¹²³ For a brief period in the early 20th century in the U.S., social and legal responses to homicides committed by adolescents were dramatically different compared to the contemporary American landscape of automatic transfer to the criminal court for adolescents charged with homicide and eligibility for capital punishment at age 16. See, Franklin E. Zimring, *American Youth Violence* (2000). Historical research by Professors David Tanenhaus and Steven Drizin revealed that sixty juvenile homicide offenders in Chicago from 1900 to 1930 were exonerated by the Coroner's Jury. David S. Tanenhaus and Steven A. Drizin, *Owing to the Extreme Youth of the Accused: The Changing Legal Response to Juvenile Homicide*, 92 J. CRIM. L. & CRIMINOLOGY 641, 653 (2002). The vast majority of these cases (52, or 83 percent) involved either a child or adolescent shooting somebody “accidentally” with a handgun. In verdicts, the coroner's juries often voiced their concerns about the availability of guns. *Id* at 654. Tanenhaus and Drizin quote criticisms of the early twentieth century social reformer Jane Addams of the easy availability of guns as a reaction to the frequency of juvenile gun homicides: “[t]here is an entire series of difficulties directly traceable to the foolish and adventurous persistence of carrying loaded firearms,” ... “this tale could be duplicated almost every morning; what might be merely a boyish scrap is turned into tragedy because some boy has a revolver.” Jane Addams, *THE SPIRIT OF YOUTH AND THE CITY STREETS* 60-61 (1909), quoted by Tanenhaus and Drizin, *Id* at 653.

124 455 US 104 (1982)

125 487 US 815 (1988)

126 492 US 361 (1989)

[L]ess culpability should attach to a crime committed by a juvenile than to a comparable crime committed by an adult. The basis of this conclusion is too obvious to require extensive explanation. Inexperience, less intelligence and less education make a teenager less able to evaluate the consequences of his or her conduct while at the same time he or she is more apt to be motivated by mere emotion or peer pressure than is an adult. The reasons that juveniles are not trusted with the privileges and responsibilities of an adult also explain why their irresponsible conduct is not as morally reprehensible as that of an adult.¹²⁷

In deciding Eighth Amendment cases, the U.S. Supreme Court applies a three part test requires that a) the original framers of the Constitution understood the punishment to be cruel and unusual; b) a societal consensus exists that the punishment offends civilized standards of human decency; and c) the punishment is either (i) grossly disproportionate to the severity of the crime or (ii) makes no measurable contribution to the accepted goals of punishment.¹²⁸ This claim about the harshness of the death penalty for juveniles is a proportionality claim: juveniles (and mentally retarded persons) should be exempted from execution because they categorically lack the degree of culpability necessary for the courts to invoke the ultimate sanction according to contemporary community standards.¹²⁹ That is, the Court's jurisprudence beginning with *Furman* relied on a narrowing requirement that justified the imposition of a death penalty on a defendant based on his or her culpability relative to others found guilty of murder.¹³⁰ In the cases below, the threads of this proportionality argument are briefly examined.

¹²⁷ 487 U.S. 815 at 835

¹²⁸ See, for example, Gregg, supra n. 4; Coker, supra n. 5; Enmund, supra n. 7.

¹²⁹ Carol Steiker and Jordan Steiker, *ABA's Proposed Moratorium: Defending Categorical Exemptions to the Death Penalty: Reflections on the ABA's Resolutions Concerning the Execution of Juveniles and Persons with Mentally Retardation*, 61 LAW & CONTEMP. PROB. 89, 91 (1998).

¹³⁰ See, for example, *Zant v. Stephens*, 462 U.S. 862, 877 (1983). In *Woodson* (428 U.S. 280 (1976)), for example, the Court used its ability to regulate the administration of the death penalty to narrow its use to those cases where the circumstances warrant such a severe punishment. In effect, the Court created a category of criminals that were so beyond rehabilitation and humanity that the only appropriate punishment would be that which is final and severe while also bolstering the illusion of a system of heightened procedural scrutiny that the public can be assured that only criminals who truly deserve the death penalty will be subject to it. See, *Woodson*, Id at 305.

1. Eddings v. Oklahoma

Monty Lee Eddings was sixteen years old when he was found guilty of the first-degree murder of an Oklahoma Highway Patrolman. In *Eddings v. Oklahoma*, the Court initially granted certiorari on the sole question of whether the execution of a child who was sixteen at the time of the crime constituted cruel and unusual punishment under the Eighth Amendment.¹³¹ An “eleventh hour claim” was presented to the Supreme Court on behalf of the petitioner, asking whether the Court should review the trial court’s refusal to consider mitigating evidence – a practice which violated the holding in *Lockett v. Ohio*.¹³² This “eleventh hour claim” ultimately formed the basis for the decision, attracting the five votes necessary to reverse and remand Eddings’ death sentence.¹³³ Thus, the Court avoided deciding the substantive age issue by vacating the defendant’s death sentence on procedural grounds. Further, Justice O’Connor’s separate concurring opinion distinctly stated that *Eddings* decision was not intended to resolve whether the imposition of the death penalty on juveniles is a constitutional practice.. The language in *Eddings*, however, has become significant as the Court instructed that the chronological age of a juvenile offender is an important factor that must be considered in death penalty cases.¹³⁴ After a few years, the Court returned to the specific issue of the constitutionality.

2. Thompson v. Oklahoma

After a few years, the Court returned to the specific issue of the constitutionality in *Thompson v. Oklahoma*.¹³⁵ In *Thompson*, a plurality of the Supreme Court held that

¹³¹ *Eddings v. Oklahoma*, 455 US 104 (1982)

¹³² 438 U.S. 586, 98 S. Ct. 2954 (1978) Lockett argued that the statute was unconstitutional due to the fact that it does not allow the sentencing judge to consider mitigating factors in capital cases, which is required by the Eighth and Fourteenth Amendments. The decision was seven and one-half to one-half. Chief Justice Burger announced the opinion of the Court, concurrences were by Justices Blackmun and Marshall, Justice Rehnquist in part concurred and in part dissented, and Justice Brennan opted not to participate. The Court also noted that a law which prohibits one from considering mitigating factors creates the risk that the death penalty will be imposed, when in fact the crime may call for a lesser penalty. “The Ohio death penalty statute does not permit the type of individualized consideration of mitigating factors required by the Eighth and Fourteenth Amendments.” *Id.*

¹³³ *Eddings*, supra n. 109, at 120 (Burger, C.J., dissenting).

¹³⁴ The Court concluded that “[y]outh is more than a chronological fact. It is a time and condition of life when a person may be most susceptible to influence and to psychological damage. Our history is replete with laws and judicial recognition that minors, especially in their earlier years, generally are less mature and responsible than adults.” *Id.*, at 115.

¹³⁵ 487 US 815 (1988). Decision announced by Stevens and joined by Brennan, Marshall and

imposing the death penalty on a defendant who was fifteen years old at the time of his crime was unconstitutional under the cruel and unusual punishment clause of the Eighth Amendment. At fifteen, William Wayne Thompson participated in the murder of his brother-in-law who had a history of abusing the boy's sister. In a 5-3 decision, the Court vacated Thompson's death sentence. Relying on the positions taken by professional organizations and foreign nations, the majority found that "it would offend civilized standards of decency to execute a person who was less than 16 years old at the time of his or her offense."¹³⁶ As evidence of changing societal attitudes, the Court noted that since the 1940s, juries infrequently imposed the death penalty on young offenders, stating:

The road we have traveled during the past four decades – in which thousands of juries have tried murder cases – leads to the unambiguous conclusion that the imposition of the death penalty on a 15-year-old offender is now generally abhorrent to the consciousness of the community.¹³⁷

Reviewing American case history and an array of social scientific literature, the Court documented the special treatment of children in the legal system. The Court identified several different areas where the law treats juveniles differently from adults, areas including the right to vote, right to serve on a jury, right to drive, right to marry, right to purchase pornographic materials, and the right to participate in legalized gambling.¹³⁸ Social science research cited in the opinion's footnotes further elaborated upon the characteristics of adolescence that contribute directly to the reduced culpability of juvenile offenders. Footnote 43 in *Thompson* cited numerous sources that demonstrate the reduced developmental abilities of children.¹³⁹

Blackmun with O'Connor concurring in judgment.

136 Id. at 830.

137 Id. at 832.

¹³⁸ Id. at 823.

139 Id. at 835 (footnote 43). "Erik Erikson, *IDENTITY: YOUTH AND CRISIS* 128-135 (1968) (discussing adolescence as a period of "identity confusion," during which youths are "preoccupied with what they appear to be in the eyes of others as compared with what they feel they are"); A.K. Gordon, *The Tattered Cloak of Immortality*, in *ADOLESCENCE AND DEATH* 16, 27 (C. Corr & J. McNeil eds. 1986) ("Risk-taking with body safety is common in the adolescent years, though sky diving, car racing, excessive use of drugs and alcoholic beverages, and other similar activities may not be directly perceived as a kind of flirting with death. In fact, in many ways, this is counterphobic behavior—a challenge to death wherein each survival of risk is a victory over death"); Robert Kastenbaum, *Time and Death in Adolescence*, in *THE MEANING OF DEATH* 99, 104 (Herman Feifel ed. 1959) ("The adolescent lives in an intense present; 'now' is so real to him that past and future seem pallid by comparison. Everything that is important and valuable in life lies either in the immediate life situation or in the rather close future"); Lawrence Kohlberg, *The Development of Children's Orientations Toward a*

The majority in *Thompson* also revived the discussion of the twin goals of the death penalty elaborated upon in *Gregg v. Georgia*: retribution and deterrence of capital crimes by future offenders.¹⁴⁰ The Court rejected both the retribution and deterrence rationale in *Thompson*. With regard to the retribution goal, the Court instructed that “[g]iven the lesser culpability of the juvenile offender, the teenager’s capacity for growth, and society’s fiduciary obligations to its children, the retributive value component of the Eighth Amendment is simply inapplicable to the execution of a fifteen year old offender.”¹⁴¹ Relying on the three-part test, the majority in *Thompson* held that the execution of individuals who were minors at the time of their crime is cruel and unusual punishment.¹⁴²

However, the impact of the *Thompson* decision was restricted, however, by the fact that only four justices reached the conclusion that the execution of a fifteen year old was unconstitutional. Again, Justice O’Connor wrote a separate concurring opinion that stopped short of recognizing a national consensus opposing the execution of juveniles. Instead, O’Connor vacated the sentence on the grounds that there was a considerable risk that the Oklahoma legislature did not consider the possibility that its death penalty statute would apply to a fifteen-year-old death eligible.¹⁴³ Thus, the practical effect of *Thompson* was that the execution of a juvenile who had committed the crime prior to age 16 was unconstitutional unless the State had proscribed a minimum age limit in its death penalty legislation.

3. *Stanford v. Kentucky*

One year later, the Court was confronted with a similar issue as in *Thompson*, *Stanford v. Kentucky* and *Wilkins v. Missouri*, but in these cases, the defendants were sixteen and seventeen, respectively, when they committed their crimes.¹⁴⁴ *Stanford*

Moral Order, 6 *Vita Humana* 11, 30 (1963) (studies reveal that "large groups of moral concepts and ways of thought only attain meaning at successively advanced ages and require the extensive background of social experience and cognitive growth represented by the age factor"); Derek H. Miller, Adolescent Suicide: Etiology and Treatment, 9 *Adolescent Psychiatry* 327, 329 (S. Feinstein, J. Looney, A. Schwartzberg, & A. Sorosky eds. 1981) (many adolescents possess a "profound conviction of their own omnipotence and immortality. Thus many adolescents may appear to be attempting suicide, but they do not really believe that death will occur"); Streib, *supra* n. 36, at 3-20, 184-189 ("The difference that separates children from adults for most purposes of the law is children's immature, undeveloped ability to reason in an adultlike manner").”

¹⁴⁰ 428 US 153 (1976).

¹⁴¹ *Id.* at 836.

¹⁴² *Id.* at 815 and note 26.

¹⁴³ *Id.* at 857. (O’Connor, concurring).

¹⁴⁴ 492 US 361 (1989) (*Stanford* and *Wilkins* cases were consolidated) Decision announced

involved the rape, sodomy and shooting murder of a twenty year old gas station attendant by petitioner Kevin Stanford when he was seventeen years and four months old. Wilkins involved the stabbing death of a convenience store worker during the commission of a robbery by Heath Wilkins when he was approximately sixteen years and six months of age. In these decisions, the Court expressly held that the imposition of the death penalty on defendants aged 16 or 17 at the commission of their crime was not unconstitutional.

In deciding the case, Justice Scalia reviewed each of the arguments set forth in *Thompson*. Rejecting the international comparisons made in *Thompson*, the majority emphasized, “it is *American* conceptions of decency that are dispositive.”¹⁴⁵ The Court reviewed past and current legislative developments and found the petitioners in both cases did not meet their burden to establish an adequate basis to find a national consensus against the juvenile death penalty. In response to the majority’s argument in *Thompson* – that the behavior of juries indicated disapproval of the execution of children – the majority in *Stanford* held that the infrequent application of capital punishment is indicative of the prosecutors’ and juries’ beliefs that capital punishment should *rarely* be imposed, not *never*.

As a final point, the Court held that there was no basis for comparison between the imposition of capital punishment on juveniles and laws regulating other realms of juvenile legal responsibility. Citing *Lockett v. Ohio*,¹⁴⁶ the Court explained:

It is, to begin with, absurd to think that one must be mature enough to drive carefully, to drink responsibly, or to vote intelligently, in order to be mature enough to understand that murdering another human being is profoundly wrong, and to conform one’s conduct to that most minimal of all civilized standards...These laws set the appropriate ages for the operation of a system that makes its determination in gross, and that does not conduct individualized maturity tests for each driver, drinker, or voter. The criminal justice system, however, does provide individualized testing. In the realm of capital punishment in particular, ‘individualized consideration is a constitutional requirement’.¹⁴⁷

Accordingly, in *Stanford*, the majority relied upon the procedural safeguards developed through the thread of death penalty jurisprudence following *Furman* to protect defendants from the arbitrary and discriminatory application of capital punishment. The Stanford court argued that the capacity determination regarding adolescents and deterrence

by Scalia and joined by Rehnquist, White, O’Connor and Kennedy

¹⁴⁵ Id. at 369, note 1. (emphasis in original).

¹⁴⁶ 438 US 586, 605 (1978).

¹⁴⁷ Id. at 374.

had already been completed, and thus all other constitutional claims related to capacity had been addressed.¹⁴⁸ In other words, those less culpable were filtered out earlier in the course of trial and hence were not exposed to the possibility of a death sentence at the lower standard of blameworthiness. The danger in this approach is that the role of procedural due process is conflated with the deliberation required for substantive factual determinations such as maturity or culpability, and the result would be an incomplete examination of the substantive constitutional issues underlying the application of the death penalty on juveniles. The mere fact that procedural due process was met does not automatically lead to the conclusion that the substantive issues have been settled.

Although the *Thompson* and *Stanford* Courts recognized that children are incomplete decision makers, judgmentally immature and unable to fully regulate all of their behavior, the precedent in *Stanford* is based heavily on procedural dimensions - not substantive considerations about the capacities or blameworthiness of juveniles at any age. This perspective sustains today's climate that permits capital punishment of children ages sixteen or seventeen. However, *Atkins* creates a competing precedent that opposes the imposition of capital punishment when defendants have diminished culpability, a return to the jurisprudential perspective that places primacy on substantive considerations of reduced culpability, capacity and understanding.

D. Decomposing the Culpability of Juveniles

In much of criminal law doctrine, punishment determinations require a measurement of the wrong that is done and the blameworthiness of the individual.¹⁴⁹ Common law

¹⁴⁸ Thompson, at 2969-70.

¹⁴⁹ See, generally, Robert Nozick, PHILOSOPHICAL EXPLANATIONS (1981); George Fletcher, BASIC CONCEPTS OF LEGAL THOUGHT (1996); Richard J. Bonnie et al, CRIMINAL LAW (1997). In his chapter "Retributive Punishment," Nozick articulates a formulaic approach for establishing proportionality of punishment in a retributivist society.. His basic algorithm is that $P(\text{punishment}) = r(\text{responsibility}) * H(\text{wrongness of act})$. For example, under retributive punishment for S's act A:

(1) Someone believes that S's act A has a certain degree of wrongness; (2) and visits a penalty upon S; (3) which is determined by the wrongness H of the act A, or by $r * H$; (4) intending that the penalty be done b/c of the wrong act A; (5) and in virtue of the wrongness of the act A; (6) intending that S know the penalty was visited upon him because he did A; (7) and in virtue of the wrongness of A; (8) by someone who intended to have the penalty fit and be done because of the wrongness of A; (9) and who intended that S would recognize (he was intended to recognize) that the penalty was visited upon him so that 1-8 are satisfied, indeed so that 1-9 are satisfied.

Nozick extends this doctrine in several ways. First, he points out that in many cases a wrongdoer's punishment includes other costs (compensating the victim, confronting wrongness of his act, etc)--these are proxied by c. In this case, $P = (r * H) - c$. Second, Nozick points to the teleological

assumes that children are immature, and because of that immaturity, they are less blameworthy than adults, so the punishments for their crimes should be proportionately less than those for a fully competent adult.¹⁵⁰ Distinguishing the immature adolescent from the mature offender who is fully responsible for his or her crimes requires a careful examination of the developmental capacities and processes that are relevant to both adolescent criminal choices and the ways in which immaturity mitigates responsibility.¹⁵¹

The most critical difference between adolescents and adults, whether in crime or in choices involving everyday social or personal behaviors, is that teenagers are less competent decision makers than adults.¹⁵² Their judgment is immature because they have not yet attained several dimensions of psychosocial development that characterize adults as

notions of retributivism that aim at “matching punishment.” This rests on the notion that punishment should aim to inform or alert S of the wrongness of A. This is an “optimistic hypothesis about what another person will or can come to know” and suggests a major problem when S is incapable of learning or realizing that his act was wrong to the same r that an average person would. Juveniles and mentally defective individuals are arguably susceptible to this effect.

Third, capital punishment generally should be reserved for those truly monstrous cases (he mentions Hitler) b/c if we are to be connected to S's value (the value of the wrongness of his act and the attempt to show him its significance through punishment), killing S would nullify any attempt at matching punishment.

Finally, he touches briefly on defining r and H, specifically. He reaches no concrete conclusions in this regard but does illustrate the need to have them defined by separate and distinct characteristics, so as to avoid circularity. Indeed, it is often difficult to separate the seriousness of the offense (H) and the responsibility (r) that the perpetrator should have with regard to it. Most importantly Nozick contends that r is best defined as the degree to which S flouts correct values, and that if defects in character contributes to this flouting, there is less flouting than there appeared to be, and r is consequentially decreased.

Nozick's framework illustrates that punishment is (or ought to be) a product of harm and culpability, the latter being vulnerable to mitigating factors associated with being a juvenile, a mentally retarded individual, or another person whose disabilities constitute a cascade of mitigators in the jurisprudence of capital punishment. If the goal of this jurisprudence is to “ensure that only the most deserving of execution are put to death,” (as Justice Stevens declared again in *Atkins*), then even a slightly mitigated r value should bring the punishment (P) under this threshold.

¹⁵⁰ Franklin Zimring, *Penal Proportionality for the Young Offender*, in *YOUTH ON TRIAL* (R. Schwartz and T. Grisso, eds.) 207 (2000).

¹⁵¹ Elizabeth S. Scott and Laurence Steinberg, *Blaming Youth*, 81 *TEX. L. REV.* 799, 800 (2002). See, also Jeffrey Fagan, *Context and Culpability of Adolescent Violence*, 6 *Va. J. Soc. Pol'y & L.* 507, 535-38 (discussing how choices to engage or reject criminal activity in specific event circumstances are proscribed by the immediate contexts in which the choice is made, and how those choices differ for adolescents in high versus low crime neighborhoods).

¹⁵² See Elizabeth S. Scott et al., *Evaluating Adolescent Decision Making in Legal Contexts*, 19 *LAW & HUM. BEHAV.* 221, 229-35 (1995) (describing developmental factors that contribute to immature judgment); Laurence Steinberg & Elizabeth Cauffman, *Maturity of Judgment in Adolescent Decision Making*, 20 *Law & Hum. Behav.* 249 (1996) (describing domains of psychosocial development as autonomy, perspective, and temperance).

mature, including the capacity for autonomous choice, self-management, risk perception and the calculation of future consequences.¹⁵³ The attainment of these developmental capacities is perhaps one reason why crime rates peak in late adolescence, but then subsequently decline as adolescent development progresses toward maturity.¹⁵⁴

Notwithstanding the fact that different adolescents develop at different rates, adolescence, generally, serves as a bridge between childhood and adulthood with regard to developing psychosocial capacity. For example, cognitive capacities for reasoning and understanding are well formed by mid-adolescence and approximate the skills shown by most adults.¹⁵⁵ But teens are less skilled in using these skills to make real-life decisions.¹⁵⁶ Adolescents also mature more slowly in other areas that contribute to immature judgment and the tendency of adolescents to make choices that are harmful to themselves or others.¹⁵⁷ Finally, adolescence is characterized by incomplete identity formation, a process that – when mixed with poor judgment and decision-making – leads to exploration, behavioral experimentation, and fluctuations in self-image.¹⁵⁸ As psychologist Laurence Steinberg shows, “[t]his movement, over the course of adolescence, from a fluid and embryonic sense of identity to one that is more stable and well-developed is paralleled by developments in the realms of morality, values, and beliefs.”¹⁵⁹ That these three dimensions of development render most adolescents immature - and therefore less than fully culpable for their behaviors, whether they be criminal or conventional – reflects striking parallels with the incompetencies of mentally retarded persons, should be obvious.

1. Understanding and Reasoning

Cognitive development – reasoning and understanding – among adolescents differs substantially from adults. Basic skills, such as information processing, attention, short and

¹⁵³ Steinberg and Cauffman, *Maturity of Judgment in Adolescent Decision Making*, Id.

¹⁵⁴ Robert J. Sampson and John H. Laub, Understanding Desistance from Crime, 28 *Crime and Justice* 1, 46-48 (2001) (reviewing literature on the robust finding that crime peaks in late adolescence and declines for most persons sharply during developmental transitions from adolescence to adulthood).

¹⁵⁵ Steinberg and Cauffman, *Maturity of Judgment in Adolescent Decision Making*, supra note 151.

¹⁵⁶ S. Ward and W. Overton. (1990). *Semantic familiarity, relevance, and the development of deductive reasoning*. DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY, 26, 488-493.

¹⁵⁷ Elizabeth Scott, Evaluating Adolescent Decision Making, supra note 152; Elizabeth S. Scott and Thomas Grisso, *The Evolution of Adolescence: A Developmental Perspective on Juvenile Justice Reform*, 88 J. CRIM. L. & CRIMINOLOGY 137, 165-66 (1997)

¹⁵⁸ Laurence D. Steinberg, ADOLESCENCE (6th ed. 2002)

¹⁵⁹ Id.

long-term memory, and organization, are acquired steadily through adolescence.¹⁶⁰ Although social science evidence suggests that adolescents' capacities for understanding and reasoning in making decisions roughly approximate those of adults by mid-adolescence, most of the research leading to these conclusions was done in unstressful and decontextualized laboratory situations.¹⁶¹ It is uncertain whether these results would obtain in ambiguous situations, or be the same under arousal in unstructured settings where peer dynamics have strong influence on adolescent choices. Scott and Steinberg conclude that the empirical evidence is uncertain whether adolescent cognitive capacity as it affects choices relevant to criminal conduct is comparable to that of adults.¹⁶²

2. Judgment Factors in Decision-making

Even when adolescent cognitive capacities approximate the levels of adults, other developmental dimensions that progress more slowly lead to immature judgment and poor decision-making. The psychosocial factors most relevant to differences in judgment include: (a) peer orientation, (b) attitudes toward and perception of risk, (c) temporal perspective, and (d) capacity for self-management.¹⁶³ "Whereas cognitive capacities shape the process of decision-making, immature judgment can affect outcomes, because these developmental factors influence adolescent values and preferences, that in turn drive the cost-benefit calculus in the making of choices."¹⁶⁴

Parents and developmental psychologists have both long known that adolescents are more responsive to *peer influence* than are adults, that these influences are greatest in mid-adolescence and that they decline slowly during the high school years.¹⁶⁵ Peer influence affects adolescent judgment both directly and indirectly. In some contexts, adolescents might make choices in response to direct peer pressure. Adolescents' desire for peer approval affects their choices, even without direct coercion. *Future orientation* is

¹⁶⁰ See, for example, Daniel P. Keating, *Adolescent Thinking*, in AT THE THRESHOLD: THE DEVELOPING ADOLESCENT 54 (S. Shirley Feldman & Glen R. Elliott eds. 1990).

¹⁶¹ The claim is tentative because it is supported by a group of small research studies conducted in laboratory settings that for the most part involved white middle class subjects and no adult control groups. Tasks often are artificial, and are not performed under conditions of stress or arousal that are typical of the situations in which adolescents often find themselves when they must decide to engage in a criminal act. Scott and Steinberg, *supra* n. 129, at 813-814; see Gardner, *Asserting Scientific Authority: Cognitive Development and Adolescent Legal Rights*, 44 *Am. Psychologist* 895 (1989). See, also, Jeffrey Fagan, *Context and Culpability in Adolescent Crime*, *supra* note 151.

¹⁶² Scott and Steinberg, *id* at 151.

¹⁶³ Scott and Steinberg, *Blaming Youth*, *supra* n. 151; Steinberg & Cauffman, *supra* note 133.

¹⁶⁴ Scott and Steinberg, *Blaming Youth*, *supra* n. 151.

¹⁶⁵ B. Bradford Brown, *Peer Groups and Peer Cultures*, in AT THE THRESHOLD: THE DEVELOPING ADOLESCENT 171 (S. Shirley Feldman & Glen R. Elliott eds. 1990).

the extent to which individuals consider both long-term and short-term consequences of their actions in making choices. Compared to adults, adolescents tend to telescope the future, placing it farther into the background of decision making than do adults, while at the same time disproportionately weighing the short term consequences of decisions - both risks and benefits - in making choices.¹⁶⁶

Adolescents also perceive and weigh *risk* differently from adults.¹⁶⁷ Adolescents take more risks with health and safety than do older adults, such as unprotected sex,¹⁶⁸ drunk driving¹⁶⁹ and other illegal behaviors.¹⁷⁰ Peer influence interacts with risk taking: empirical evidence shows that people generally make riskier decisions in groups than they do alone.¹⁷¹ Adolescents seem to be less risk averse than adults because they overstate rewards while underestimating risks.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁶ Steinberg and Cauffman, *supra* n. 155; Scott and Steinberg, *Blaming Youth*, *supra* n. 151, citing See William Gardner & Janna Herman, *Adolescents' AIDS Risk Taking: A Rational Choice Perspective*, in *ADOLESCENTS IN THE AIDS EPIDEMIC* 24 (William Gardner et al. eds., 1990). Scott and Steinberg cite several explanations for this age gap in future orientation. "First, owing to cognitive limitations in their ability to think in hypothetical terms, adolescents simply may be less able than adults to think about events that have not yet occurred (i.e., events that may occur sometime in the future). Second, weaker future orientation of adolescents may reflect their more limited life experience. For adolescents, a consequence five years off may seem very remote; they may simply attach more weight to short term consequences because they seem more salient to their lives. How far out in time individuals are able to project events may be proportionate to their age; ten years represents one-fifth of the lifespan for someone who is 50, but two-thirds for someone who is 15." See William Gardner, *A Life-Span Rational-Choice Theory of Risk Taking*, in *ADOLESCENT RISK TAKING*, 78-79, (Nancy J. Bell & Robert W. Bell eds., 1993).

¹⁶⁷ See Lita Furby & Ruth Beyth-Marom, *Risk Taking in Adolescence: A Decision-Making Perspective*, 12 *DEVELOPMENTAL REV.* 1, 1-2 (1992) (presenting a rational-decisionmaking model of adolescent risky behavior).

¹⁶⁸ Gardner and Herman, *supra* note 142.

¹⁶⁹ Furby and Beyth-Marom, *supra* note 167.

¹⁷⁰ See, for example, Alida Benthin, Paul Slovic, et al., *Adolescent Health-Threatening and Health-Enhancing Behaviors: A Study of Word Association*, in Paul Slovic, *THE PERCEPTION OF RISK* (2000).

¹⁷¹ Scott and Steinberg, *supra* n. 151.

¹⁷² Steinberg and Cauffman, *supra* n.153 Scott and Steinberg note that this may relate in part to limits on youthful time perspective; taking risks is more costly for those with a stake in the future. Finally, adolescents may have different values and goals than do adults, that lead them to calculate risks and rewards differently. For example, the danger of risk taking could constitute a reward for an adolescent but a cost to an adult. Moreover, peer rejection is likely to be weighed more heavily in adolescent than adult choices. For instance, whereas an adult might simply weigh the pleasant effects of experimenting with an illicit drug against criminal apprehension or potential health risks, an adolescent might weigh the peer acceptance or rejection that might result from the choice. See, also, L.L. Lopes, *Between Hope and Fear: The Psychology of Risk*, 20 *ADVANCES EXPERIMENTAL SOC. PSYCH.* 255 (1987).

Impulsivity and poor self-management also appear to be greater in adolescents than in adults. Impulsivity increases between middle adolescence and early adulthood and declines thereafter, as does sensation-seeking.¹⁷³ Emotional regulation also is more erratic among adolescents than adults,¹⁷⁴ and adolescents may have more difficulty regulating their moods, impulses, and behaviors than do adults.¹⁷⁵

Some of the differences between adults and adolescents may reflect not just psychosocial development, but also its underlying organic structure. The disjuncture between physical maturity, and uneven maturity in different parts of the brain that regulate different functions, creates an imbalance in adolescents that can adversely influence their judgment and decision-making. Scott and Steinberg summarize this process as it pertains to this developing area of research:

At puberty, changes in the limbic system B a part of the brain that is central in the processing and regulation of emotion B may stimulate adolescents to seek higher levels of novelty and to take more risks; and may contribute to increased emotionality and vulnerability to stress. At the same time, patterns of development in the prefrontal cortex, which is active during the performance of complicated tasks involving planning and decision-making, suggest that these higher-order cognitive capacities may be immature well into middle adolescence. One scientist has likened the psychological consequences of brain development in adolescence to “starting the engines without a skilled driver”¹⁷⁶

Recent studies suggest that there are functions and regions of the brain that regulate long-term planning, regulation of emotion, impulse control, and the evaluation of risk and reward continue to mature over the course of adolescence, and perhaps beyond age 20,

¹⁷³ Steinberg & Cauffman, *supra* note 151.

¹⁷⁴ Research on brain development, indicates that the organic bases of functions such long-term planning, regulation of emotion, impulse control, and the evaluation of risk and reward are not fully mature by the end of adolescence. See, Patricia Spear, *The Adolescent Brain and Age-Related Behavioral Manifestations*, 24 *Neuroscience & BIOBEHAVIORAL REVIEWS* 417 (2000) (reviewing animal and human research on brain maturation during puberty and indicating that “remodelling of the brain” during adolescence occurs among different species) (also cited in Scott and Steinberg, n. 71).

¹⁷⁵ See, for example, Reed Larson et al., *Mood Variability and the Psycho-Social Adjustment of Adolescents*, 9 *J. Youth & Adolescence* 469, 488 (1980) (presenting a study finding wider mood fluctuations among adolescents than adults) (cited in Scott and Steinberg, n. 70).

¹⁷⁶ Scott and Steinberg, *supra* n.151, citing Ronald Dahl, *Affect Regulation, Brain Development, and Behavioral/Emotional Health in Adolescence*, 6 *CNS SPECTRUMS* 60 (2001).

well into young adulthood.¹⁷⁷ Functional brain imaging and postmortem studies suggest that frontal lobes do not fully mature until young adulthood.¹⁷⁸ This study compared MRI scans of young adults, 23-30, with those of teens, 12-16. The researchers looked for signs of myelin, which would imply more mature, efficient neural connections. Areas of the frontal lobe showed the largest differences between young adults and teens. This increased myelination in the adult frontal cortex likely relates to the maturation of cognitive processing and other “executive” functions. Many other areas – those that mediate spatial, sensory, auditory and language functions – already seemed mature in the teen brain. Instead, the observed late maturation of the frontal lobe is characteristic of impaired “executive” functioning.¹⁷⁹

Another series of MRI studies suggest that teens may process emotions differently than adults.¹⁸⁰ Researchers at Harvard's McLean Hospital scanned subjects' brain activity while they identified emotions on pictures of faces displayed on a computer screen.¹⁸¹ Young teens (below 14), who characteristically perform poorly on the task, activated the amygdala, a brain center that mediates fear and other "gut" reactions, more than the frontal lobe. As teens grow older, their brain activity during this task tends to shift to the frontal lobe, leading to more reasoned perceptions and improved performance.¹⁸² Similarly, the researchers saw a shift in activation as teens got older from the temporal lobe to the frontal lobe during a language skills task. The studies were imprecise as to a “bright line” threshold when frontal lobe activity dominated cognitive and emotional tasks, but the researchers did note significant variability in the age at which these functional thresholds are achieved: some teens reach this stage of “mature” (frontal lobe) functioning at 14, while many others have

¹⁷⁷ Spear, *supra* n. 175; See, also, Jay N. Giedd, Jonathan Blumenthal, Neal O. Jeffries, et al. Brain development during child-hood and adolescence: a longitudinal MRI study. 2 *Nature Neuroscience* 861, 861-3 (1999); Judith L. Rapoport, Jay N. Giedd, Jonathan Blumenthal et al., *Progressive cortical change during adolescence in childhood-onset schizophrenia. A longitudinal magnetic resonance imaging study.* 56 *ARCHIVES OF GENERAL PSYCHIATRY* 649, 652-54 (1999); Paul M. Thompson, Jay N. Giedd, et al., *Growth patterns in the developing brain detected by using continuum mechanical tensor maps.* 404 *NATURE* 190-3 (2000); Avshalom Caspi, Terrie E. Moffitt, et al., *Role of Genotype in the Cycle of Violence in Maltreated Children* 297 *SCIENCE* 851-4 (2002).

¹⁷⁸ Elizabeth R. Sowell, Paul M. Thompson, Colin J. Holmes, et al. In vivo evidence for post-adolescent brain maturation in frontal and striatal regions. 2 *Nature Neuroscience*, 851 (1999).

¹⁷⁹ *Id.*

¹⁸⁰ National Institute of Mental Health, Teen Brain: A Work in Progress, <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/teenbrain.cfm>, visited October 12, 2002.

¹⁸¹ Baird AA, Gruber SA, Fein DA, et al. Functional magnetic resonance imaging of facial affect recognition in children and adolescents, 32 *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 195 (1999).

¹⁸² *Id.* at ___.

not yet reached it by age 20 or later into young adult years.¹⁸³

Professor Ruben Gur concludes that brain maturation is not complete until about age 21, with large variation in myelination in different regions of the brain, a marker of uneven maturation in areas associated with cognitive and emotional function.¹⁸⁴ Based on a review of both experimental studies and both brain imaging and Magnetic Resonant Imaging (MRI) analyses, Professor Gur explicitly links these brain regions to the control of aggression and other impulses, the consideration of alternatives and consequences of actions, impulsivity, judgment, planning for the future, foresight of consequences, and other “mature thought processes” that make people morally culpable¹⁸⁵ Professor Gur concludes that there is no way to state with any scientific reliability that an individual 17-year old has a fully matured brain, regardless of the precision of other psycho-social assessments at that age.¹⁸⁶

This is a new and rapidly developing research area, where natural science complements evidence from behavioral science regarding deficits and incompetencies in adolescents that influence judgment, decision-making and emotional regulation. The implication, then, is that there exists uneven development within the adolescent brain regarding various functions, and this irregularity is also subject to significant variation *among* adolescents in the age at which they attain organic brain developmental thresholds that regulate the emotional and cognitive components of decision making and control. This variation suggests that even at later stages of adolescence, and perhaps among some young adults, there is a non-negligible percentage of people who are “immature” not just in their psychosocial functioning but in the organic development that underlies it.

3. Development and Decision Making

The tendency of adolescents to commit crimes in groups is well known,¹⁸⁷ although the mechanisms of group dynamics and peer influence are not well understood.¹⁸⁸ Changes in peer networks over time, and a diminution of the role of peers in both legal and

¹⁸³ In a recent television broadcast, Dr. Jay Giedd of the National Institute of Mental Health, stated that “...it’s sort of unfair to expect [adolescents] to have adult levels of organizational skills or decision making before the brain is finished being built.” *Frontline: Inside the Teen Brain*, January 31, 2002 (available at www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/teenbrain/, visited January 21, 2003).

¹⁸⁴ Ruben Gur, Ph.D., Declaration in *Patterson v. Texas* (123 S.Ct. (2002), *supra* n. 9 at 3-5 (claiming that maturation of association cortex is not complete “even by late adolescence” and that within this cortex, the prefrontal regions are last to mature, and that myelination is usually not complete until ages 20-22).

¹⁸⁵ *Id.* at 14-15.

¹⁸⁶ *Id.* at 15.

¹⁸⁷ Albert Reiss, Jr. & David Farrington, *Advancing Knowledge About Co-offending: Results from a Prospective Longitudinal Survey of London Males*, 82 J. CRIM. L. & CRIMINOLOGY 360 (1991).

¹⁸⁸ Patricia Adler and Peter Adler, *PEER POWER* (1999).

antisocial behavior, also characterize the predictable patterns of desistance from crime that occurs during the transition from adolescence to adulthood.¹⁸⁹ Scott and Steinberg conclude that the research on peer influence, risk preference, impulsivity, and future orientation shows that these factors affect adolescent decision making in general, and are equally likely to influence decisions to participate in crime.¹⁹⁰

Research on the social contexts of adolescent interactions shows that these group settings offer strong incentives for conformity and compliance, serving important developmental functions such as the expression of autonomy and the construction of social identity.¹⁹¹ Opportunities for crime are more abundant in settings where social controls are weak, whether in the everyday world of adolescents or the unique and stressful settings of inner cities where crime rates are highest.¹⁹² Adolescent peer orientation makes youths who live in high-crime neighborhoods susceptible to powerful pressures to join in criminal activity, and compliance may be both typical and perceived as necessary to avoid threats to an adolescent's personal safety.¹⁹³

In my studies on inner city violence in New York, I showed how social norms within urban adolescent male subcultures prescribe a set of attitudes and behaviors that

¹⁸⁹ See Robert J. Sampson and John H. Laub, *CRIME IN THE MAKING* (1993); Robert J. Sampson & John H. Laub, Understanding Desistance from Crime, 28 *Crime and Justice* 1, 46-48 (2001); Edward Mulvey & John La Rosa, Delinquency Cessation and Adolescent Development, 56 *Am. J. Orthopsychiatry* 212, 231 (1986); Terrie E. Moffitt, Adolescent-Limited and Life Course Persistent Antisocial Behavior: A Developmental Taxonomy, 100 *Psychol. Rev.* 674, 690 (1993).

¹⁹⁰ Scott and Steinberg, *supra* n. 129.

¹⁹¹ See, for example, Jeffrey Fagan and Deanna Wilkinson, *The Social Contexts and Developmental Functions of Adolescent Violence*, in *VIOLENCE IN AMERICAN SCHOOLS* (B. Hamburg et al. eds.) 89 (1998).

¹⁹² See, for example, Robert J. Bursik, Jr., and Harold G. Grasmick, *NEIGHBORHOODS AND CRIME: THE DIMENSIONS OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY CONTROL* (1993); Philip J. Cook and John H. Laub, The Unprecedented Epidemic in Youth Violence, in *YOUTH VIOLENCE* (M Tonry and MH Moore, eds.) 27 (1998); Robert J. Sampson and Janet Lauritsen, Individual and Community Factors in Violent Offending and Victimization, in *UNDERSTANDING AND PREVENTING VIOLENCE*, Vol. 3 (A. Reiss and J. Roth, eds.) 1 (1994).

¹⁹³ Jeffrey Fagan, *Context and Culpability of Adolescent Violence*, 6 *VA. J. SOC. POL'Y & L.* 507, 535-38; Jeffrey Fagan and Deanna Wilkinson, *Guns, Youth Violence and Social Identity*, in *YOUTH VIOLENCE* (M Tonry and MH Moore, eds.) 105 (1998). This study described the way in which the peer social context coerces youths to follow set "scripts" that can lead to violent confrontation. Conformity to these social norms is enforced with severe sanctions. Similar studies of the everyday lives of inner city adolescents in neighborhoods with high rates of violence include: Elijah Anderson, *CODE OF THE STREET: DECENCY, VIOLENCE, AND THE MORAL LIFE OF THE INNER CITY* (1999). Geoffrey Canada, *FIST, STICK, KNIFE, GUN* (1997), Sudhir Venkatesh, *AMERICAN PROJECT* (2000).

often lead to violent crime.¹⁹⁴ Avoiding confrontation when challenged by a rival results in a loss of social status and ostracism by peer affiliates, which itself can create vulnerability to physical attack. Ordinary youths in poor urban neighborhoods face coercive peer pressure and sometimes tangible threats that both propel them to get involved in crime and make extrication difficult. Their limited ability to see beyond their immediate social and physical world to the norms and institutions of the dominant society reflects not only their attenuated psycho-social development and decision-making skills, but also the influence of their social context, as well.¹⁹⁵

For most adolescents, these characteristic developmental influences on decision-making will change in predictable ways as they mature. During the maturational journey to adulthood, adolescents become better decision-makers as they grow out of their natural susceptibility to peer influence, their risk perception improves, their computation of risk becomes more balanced and longer in temporal perspective, and self-regulation evolves.¹⁹⁶

These changes lead to changes in the calculus, and competency, of decision-making.¹⁹⁷ “The adolescent becomes an adult who is likely to make different choices from his youthful self, choices that reflect more mature judgment.”¹⁹⁸ Imagine, then, the mentally retarded person who cannot mature in this fashion and develop these competencies, and the basis for extending the logic of Atkins to adolescents becomes transparent.

E. Development and the Jurisprudence of Culpability for Adolescents

The principle of penal proportionality leads to a determination of punishment that combines the degree of harm of the act and the blameworthiness of the actor.¹⁹⁹ Determining blameworthiness, whether in absolute or relative terms, is a process that draws strength not just from normative or moral views, but from more complex and nuanced judgments about exogenous factors that bear on culpability – both contextual factors that bear on the incident itself or the circumstances in which the actor is situated, and developmental factors related to emotional, cognitive and other psycho-social functions residing within individuals.²⁰⁰ Some models of culpability are based on rationality and

¹⁹⁴ Fagan and Wilkinson, Id.

¹⁹⁵ Deanna L. Wilkinson and Jeffrey Fagan, *A Theory of Violent Events*, in *THE PROCESS AND STRUCTURE OF CRIME* (Robert Meier and Leslie Kennedy, eds.) 169, 183 (2001).

¹⁹⁶ Scott and Steinberg, supra n. 151; Steinberg and Cauffman, supra n.151; Scott and Grisso, supra n.157.

¹⁹⁷ Scott and Steinberg, *Blaming Youth*, supra n. 151 at 836.

¹⁹⁸ Id.

¹⁹⁹ See, generally, Robert Nozick, *PHILOSOPHICAL EXPLANATIONS* (1981); George Fletcher, *BASIC CONCEPTS OF LEGAL THOUGHT* (1996), supra n. 127.

²⁰⁰ See, generally, Jeffrey Fagan, *Context and Culpability in Adolescent Violence*, supra n. 193.

volition, embracing assumptions about the capacity to make rational choice.²⁰¹ Actors whose decisions are impaired are less culpable than those who are fully functional, as are those whose choices are severely constrained by either circumstances or individual (functional) limitations.²⁰² Judgments about the degree of these limitations will determine if the person is judged less culpable and deserving of a lesser punishment compared to the fully functional defendant. These persons may be fully responsible but perhaps less than fully culpable.

The existence of a separate system of juvenile justice, with its own language and jurisprudence, expresses the normative view that adolescents are generally less blameworthy than adults.²⁰³ Scott and Steinberg distinguish between the culpability of adolescent offenders – which is mitigated by their developmental deficits – and their responsibility for their behavior choices.²⁰⁴ In other words, adolescence as a developmental status is mitigating but not exculpatory, they say.²⁰⁵ The developmental deficits discussed earlier are not the deficits of an atypical adolescent, but are “normal” developmental processes common to all adolescents. To the degree that there is variation among adolescents, whether offenders or not, these differences are predictable and subject to a variety of contextual, circumstantial and intra-individual factors. In this jurisprudence,

²⁰¹ See, H.L.A. Hart, PUNISHMENT AND RESPONSIBILITY: ESSAYS IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF LAW 152 (1968), Sanford H. Kadish, *The Decline of Innocence*, in BLAME AND PUNISHMENT: ESSAYS IN THE CRIMINAL LAW 65 (1987), Joshua Dressler, *Reflections on Excusing Wrongdoers: Moral Theory, New Excuses and the Model Penal Code*, 19 RUTGERS L.J. 671, 701-02 (1988), Stephen J. Morse, *Culpability and Control*, 142 PENN. L. REV. 1587 (1994). There are notable exceptions. See Franklin E. Zimring, *Penal Proportionality for the Young Offender: Notes on Immaturity, Capacity, and Diminished Responsibility*, in YOUTH ON TRIAL: A DEVELOPMENTAL PERSPECTIVE ON JUVENILE JUSTICE, (Thomas Grisso & Robert G. Schwartz eds.) 271 (2000) (arguing that under principles of penal proportionality, immaturity mitigates the blameworthiness of juvenile offenders).

²⁰² See, for example, Wayne LaFave and Austin Scott, CRIMINAL LAW 373 (1972). Duress is an excuse, in the conventional view, in which the actor is placed under such a threat the “...a person of reasonable fairness would be unable to resist the pressure” MPC 3.04. It does not imply that the balance of interests is sufficient to outweigh the harm of the offense. But this is further complicated by a variety of factors irrelevant to this distinction: duress usually is a response to a human actor, compared to a “choice of evils” claim that worse things would result if a defensive action were not taken. There are other justifications and excuses in the MPC, including for example, mistakes, legal authority, and parental discipline. See, also, Jeffrey Fagan, *Contexts of Choice by Adolescents in Criminal Events*, YOUTH ON TRIAL (Thomas Grisso and Robert Schwartz, eds.) 371 (2000).

²⁰³ Julian W. Mack, *The Juvenile Court*, 23 Harv. L. Rev. 104, 107 (1909); Murray Levine & Adeline Levine, *A Social History of Helping Services: Clinic, Court, School, and Community* 155-58 (1970) ; Franklin E. Zimring, *Punitive Necessity of Waiver*, supra n. 104; Steven Scholssman, *LOVE AND THE AMERICAN DELINQUENT*, supra.

²⁰⁴ Scott and Steinberg, supra n. 129 at 828-829.

²⁰⁵ Id at 829.

the crimes of adolescents are a function of immaturity, compared to the crimes of adults, which are the acts of morally responsible, yet possibly cognitively and emotionally deficient actors.

This is not necessarily a question of the capacity of teenagers to understand the harms they do and the consequences of their acts. Most development psychologists agree that they do. Among adults, that type of incapacity might better describe mentally disordered persons or some mentally retarded persons. Rather, this question considers that it is immature and otherwise defective judgment that contributes to decisions by adolescents, along with their inability to make judgments with the same skills and capacities as adults, which reduces their culpability and blameworthiness. “Due to these developmental influences, youths are likely to act more impulsively and to weigh the consequences of their options differently from adults, discounting risks and future consequences, and overvaluing (by adult lights) peer approval, immediate consequences, and the excitement of risk taking. These influences are predictable, systematic and developmental in nature (rather than an expression of personal values), and they undermine decision making capacity in ways that are generally accepted as mitigating of culpability.”²⁰⁶

F. Development and Competence: The Danger of False Confessions

In *Atkins*, the Court noted “. . .[t]he risk that the death penalty will be imposed in spite of factors which may call for a less severe penalty, is enhanced. . . .by the possibility of false confessions”.²⁰⁷ The same risks are evident in several recent cases where juveniles falsely confessed to homicides during interrogations by police.²⁰⁸ Juvenile suspects have

²⁰⁶ *Id* at 830.

²⁰⁷ *Atkins* at 2251-2 and Fn 24, citing Everington & Fulero, *Competence to Confess: Measuring Understanding and Suggestibility of Defendants with Mental Retardation* 37 *Mental Retardation* 212, 212-213, 535 (1999). In note 25, the Court then went on to cite two instances of mentally retarded inmates whose death sentences were overturned and they were exonerated: “As two recent high-profile cases demonstrate, these exonerations include mentally retarded persons who unwittingly confessed to crimes that they did not commit. See Baker, *Death-Row Inmate Gets Clemency; Agreement Ends Days of Suspense*, *Washington Post*, Jan. 15, 1994, p. A1; Holt & McRoberts, *Porter Fully Savors First Taste of Freedom; Judge Releases Man Once Set for Execution*, *Chicago Tribune*, Feb. 6, 1999, p. N1.”

²⁰⁸ Richard A. Leo and Richard J. Ofshe, *The Consequences of False Confessions: Deprivations of Liberty and Miscarriages of Justice in the Age of Psychological Interrogation*, 88 *J. CRIM. L. & CRIMINOLOGY* 429 (1998). See, also, Tanenhaus and Drizin, *Owing to the Extreme Youth of the Accused*, *supra* note 123 at 671-689 (discussing cases of false confessions by very young offenders in homicide cases). But see, Paul G. Cassell, *The Guilty and The “Innocent”: An Examination of Alleged Cases of False Conviction from False Confessions*, 22 *HARV. J.L. & PUB. POL’Y* 523 (1999) (suggesting that many defendants who were described as innocent following false confessions may have been guilty despite the miscarriage of justice produced by aggressive police interrogations, and

long been considered a population that is particularly vulnerable to coercion and false confessions. Because of their underdeveloped thought processes and immaturity, they are less likely to understand their rights.²⁰⁹ The United States Supreme Court has also long

that these cases are concentrated among the mentally retarded). For a recent review of false confessions in capital cases, see Welch S. White, *Confessions in Capital Cases*, 2003 ILLINOIS L. REV. (forthcoming).

²⁰⁹ Thomas Grisso, *Juveniles' Capacity to Waive Miranda Rights: An Empirical Analysis*, 68 CAL. L. REV. 1134 (1980). A separate though related issue is whether (or to what extent) the factors that make a person less culpable might also make them less competent to stand trial. One might conclude that the developmental deficits that render adolescents less culpable might also indicate that they lack sufficient adjudicative competence – by virtue of their immaturity – to stand trial. There is empirical evidence that younger adolescents perform more poorly than adults (and on a level similar to that of mentally retarded adults) on tests of adjudicative competence. These differences are likely to have been understated in this research, where tasks were performed in an artificial laboratory setting rather than in the more salient, arousing or threatening atmosphere of an actual court proceeding. See, Thomas Grisso et al., *Juveniles' Competence to Stand Trial: A Comparison of Adolescents' and Adults' Capacities as Trial Defendants*, 27 LAW & HUMAN BEHAVIOR 333 (2003). However, both law and social science have noted that the skills required to participate effectively in one's own defense (for example, the ability to reason, to identify information of value to counsel, and to understand the proceedings, the roles of those participating, and the consequences of strategy decisions) would not necessarily indicate sufficient maturity to warrant full responsibility for one's actions (see, Franklin E. Zimring, *Penal Proportionality for the Young Offender: Notes on Immaturity, Capacity and Diminished Responsibility*, 267 YOUTH ON TRIAL (Thomas Grisso and Robert G. Schwartz, eds.) (2000)). Accordingly, the dimensions of adjudicative competence – and whether a juvenile is “immature” by these standards – only partially overlap with the dimensions of immaturity that comprise diminished responsibility under death penalty jurisprudence. Only some of the factors that make an adolescent less culpable might also make him or her less competent to stand trial.

The standards for adjudicative competence for juveniles were constructed in a series of cases beginning in 1960 with *Dusky v. United States* (362 U.S. 402, 80 S.Ct. 788, 4 L.Ed.2d 824 (1960) (holding that the competence of a juvenile defendant depended on an assessment of “whether he has sufficient present ability to consult with his lawyer with a reasonable degree of rational understanding and whether he has rational as well as factual understanding of proceeding against him and it is not enough that he is oriented to time and place and has some recollection of events”). In *Drope v. Missouri*, (420 U.S. 162, 171-172, 95 S.Ct. 896, 903-904, 43 L.Ed.2d 103 (1975)), the U.S. Supreme Court broadened the standards for adjudicative competence to include the right to testify on one's own behalf *or* to remain silent without penalty for doing so.

Some states go so far as to include the term “immaturity” in setting a competency standard for adolescents. See, FL, LA AK. A recent thread of cases also illustrates the increasing emphasis on immaturity in determinations of juvenile's competence to stand trial. See *In re J.M.* (769 A.2d 656 (Vermont 2001)), requiring that the “evaluation of a juvenile's competency is to be made with regard to juvenile [developmental] norms”; *Carey v. Michigan* (615 N.W.2d 742 (Michigan 2000) (requiring that “competency evaluations should be made in light of juvenile, rather than adult, norms”); *Golden v. Arkansas* (21 S.W.3d 801 (Arkansas, 2000) (stating that competency evaluations should apply an “age-appropriate capacity standard to juveniles, which is different from adults”); *In re Charles B.*, (“...although the juvenile...has no mental disorder or disability, he fits the description of

recognized this particular vulnerability of juvenile offenders and has mandated safeguards in the form of procedural due process for juveniles in police custody.²¹⁰ Given the emotional and intellectual immaturity of minors, harsh police interrogation may seriously jeopardize the reliability of a confession.

Experimental evidence from controlled studies and case autopsies show that adolescents may be vulnerable to false confessions owing to their immaturity and its concomitant factors: their suggestibility and their proneness to coercion.²¹¹ Juveniles generally are more susceptible to suggestion, thus making them more likely to implicate themselves in a crime or implicate themselves in a crime they did not commit. This often results as a reaction to what a child would perceive as a threat from an authority figure.

‘incompetent’...because he lacks a present ability to consult with his attorney with a reasonable degree of rational understanding, and he does not have a rational and factual understanding of the proceeding against him”).

So, the overlap in the components of immaturity that shape reduced culpability differ from those that suggest that immaturity might reduce the adjudicative competence of adolescent defendants in criminal court. Moreover, these factors have a complex interaction when considering adolescents’ competence to stand trial. Susceptibility to peer pressure, impulsivity, and poor emotional self-regulation, for example, reduce one’s culpability (consistent with the reasoning of *Atkins*), but play a much lesser role in determining whether one is competent to stand trial because, presumably, counsel is provided to ensure that legal decisions and strategies are not pursued impulsively and that the defendant is not unduly pressured into a plea bargain or into self-incriminating testimony. By the same token, however, these culpability-reducing factors *are* likely to influence behavior during interrogation (when a suspect who is impulsive or susceptible to peer pressure might be tempted, for example, to make a false confession) when counsel is not present. Such factors are thus important when determining whether an individual is competent to waive Miranda rights. Accordingly, the characteristics that indicate a lack of sufficient culpability to warrant execution (as cited in *Atkins*, *Thompson* or *Simmons*) do not necessarily imply a lack of adjudicative competence.

²¹⁰ See *Gallegos v. Colorado*, 82 S.Ct. 1209 (1962), and *Haley v. Ohio*, 332 S.Ct. 596 (1948). In *Gallegos*, the Court recognized the limited ability of a minor to comprehend constitutional concepts:

"[A] 14 year old boy, no matter how sophisticated, is unlikely to have any conception of what will confront him when he is made accessible only to police. That is to say, we deal with a person who is not equal to the police in knowledge and understanding of the consequences of the questions and answers being recorded and who is unable to know how to protect his own interests or how to get the benefits of his constitutional rights." *Gallegos*, 370 U.S. at 54, 82 S.Ct. at 1212, 8 L.Ed.2d at 328.

In *Haley*, the Court made nearly identical statements about a male suspect who was 15 years of age.

²¹¹ Saul M. Kassin, *The Psychology of Confession Evidence*, 52 AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGIST 221 (1997); Gerald Robin, *Juvenile Interrogation and Confessions*, 10 J. POLICE SCIENCE AND ADMINISTRATION 224 (1982); Allison Redlich, False Confessions: The Influence of Age, Suggestibility and Maturity, Dissertation Abstract 2000-95008-097 (2000); Jenise Kohnke, Adolescents’ Susceptibility to Interrogative Suggestibility Utilizing Simulated Law-Enforcement Techniques, Dissertation Abstract 2002-95012-126 (2002).

Suggestibility is inversely related to intelligence,²¹² increasing their risk of susceptibility to giving false confessions.²¹³ In laboratory studies, adolescents with low intelligence were much more susceptible to leading questions, confabulate more, and are more acquiescent with interrogators.²¹⁴ The more suggestible subjects are, the less accurate they are in recalling details, and the more erroneous information is produced during interrogation.²¹⁵ Low IQ subjects are more likely to believe that falsely confessing will have little or no consequences, because of their knowledge of the truth of the matter and belief that truth always wins out. This naiveté renders low functioning subjects at higher risk for falsely confessing than normal functioning subjects. Combined with susceptibility to acquiescence, suggestibility, compliance with authority, and proclivity to confabulate puts low IQ subjects at significantly higher risk for false confession in context of a police interrogation.²¹⁶ The case autopsies by Professors Tanenhaus and Drizin²¹⁷ show that aggressive police tactics during interrogations of adolescents often produce confessions that later are proved false.

The recent well-publicized reversals of the convictions of five New York City teenagers, ages 15 to 17 at the time of the attack, accused of brutally raping a female jogger in Central Park, illustrates the vulnerability of adolescents to giving false confessions.²¹⁸ More than a decade after their convictions and after some had served long prison sentences, the real attacker came forward and confessed to the crime.²¹⁹ DNA tests of Mr. Reyes semen and other materials confirmed his presence at the crime scene. The absence of DNA evidence from any of the five teens at the crime scene motivated their

²¹² G.H. Gudjonsson, *Suggestibility and Compliance among Alleged False Confessors and Resisters in Criminal Trials*, 31 MEDICINE, SCIENCE AND THE LAW 147, 149 (1991).

²¹³ S.J. Ceci, D.F. Ross, and M.P. Toglia, *Suggestibility of Children's Memory: Psycholegal Implications*, 116 JOURNAL OF EXPERIMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY 38 (1987)

²¹⁴ Saul M. Kassin and Katherine L. Kiechel, *The Social Psychology of False Confessions: Compliance, Internalization, and Confabulation*, 7 PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCE 125, 129 (1996).

²¹⁵ Saul M. Kassin and H. Sukel, *Coerced Confessions and the Jury: An Experimental Test of the "Harmless Error" Rule*, 21 LAW AND HUMAN BEHAVIOR 27, 42 (1997).

²¹⁶ Gudjonsson, *Suggestibility and Compliance among Alleged False Confessors*, *supra* note 212.

²¹⁷ Tanenhaus and Drizin, *Owing to the Extreme Youth of the Accused*, *supra* note 123 at 671-689 (discussing cases of false confessions by very young offenders in homicide cases).

²¹⁸ S. Kassin, *False Confessions and the Jogger Case*, New York Times, November 1, 2002, at A23. See, also, S.L. Davies, *The Reality of False Confessions: Lessons of the Central Park Jogger Case about the Need for Gatekeepers for the "Gatehouse"* (unpublished, manuscript on file with author). See, generally, R.A. Leo and R.J. Ofshe, *The Consequences Of False Confessions: Deprivations Of Liberty And Miscarriages Of Justice In The Age Of Psychological Interrogation*, 88 J. CRIM. L. & CRIMINOLOGY 429 (1998).

²¹⁹ Jim Dwyer and Kevin Flynn, *New Light on Jogger's Rape Calls Evidence into Question*, New York Times, December 1, 2002, at A1.

exoneration, in addition to inconsistencies in the details they provided on the victim's clothing and the attack itself.

The persistence of false confession cases involving both the young defendants described by Professors Tanenhaus and Drizin, and the older teenagers in the Central Park jogger case, coupled with the laboratory evidence of adolescents' susceptibility to suggestion and vulnerability to coercion, place adolescents at elevated risk of making false confessions to both capital and other serious crimes. In experiments and other laboratory studies, the spread in susceptibility scores in these experiments suggests that many defendants older than 16 would be prone to false confessions.²²⁰ And, while these studies involve adolescents below age 16, most of the Central Park defendants were above 16 and death-eligible had theirs been a capital case.

The Supreme Court in both *Gallegos* and *Haley* has been concerned with two primary problems in the interrogation of minors. The first inquiry is whether or not a juvenile has the capacity to comprehend his or her Fifth Amendment rights against self-incrimination. Although the standard Miranda warning is given, there are arguments that the vocabulary contained in the Miranda warning is too advanced for a teenager's comprehension or that the warning is not given to children until after a confession has already been attained. The second question revolves around the reliability of "voluntary" confessions of juveniles in police custody. Given the emotional and intellectual immaturity of minors, both the condition and process of interrogation may seriously jeopardize the reliability of a confession, and place them at risk for a death sentence and the specter of wrongful execution.

G. Converting Mitigation to a Categorical Exceptions of Juveniles from Capital Punishment

The convergence of scientific evidence on immaturity from developmental psychology with the nascent evidence in biology raises the question of a *categorical* exception to criminal punishment generally for juveniles. That is not at issue in this essay,²²¹

²²⁰ See, *infra* Section IV and note 241

²²¹ From the outset of the juvenile court, its founders recognized that some youths would necessarily be expelled and be subject to adult punishment. See, David Tanenhaus, in Fagan and Zimring, *THE CHANGING BORDERS OF JUVENILE JUSTICE*, *supra* note 104. Juvenile offenders often commit crimes whose seriousness commands harsh punishment. See, Franklin E. Zimring, in Fagan and Zimring, *THE CHANGING BORDERS OF JUVENILE JUSTICE*, *Id.* There is a vigorous debate as to which juveniles should be subject to punishment as adults, how they should be identified, the legal arrangements and procedural mechanisms that regulate the flow of cases that are relocated from the juvenile court to the criminal court, and how they should be punished once transferred. See, Francis

although a variety of rationales have been advanced for a categorical reduction in sentence severity for adolescents.²²² Here, for proportionality considerations, and precisely because death is different, a general exception should apply to the most severe form of punishment.²²³ The *Thompson* Court stated, in effect, that immaturity was *categorically* a mitigator of culpability in capital cases, but that case-by-case determinations might not adequately protect all juveniles so exposed.²²⁴ In other words, the “narrowing jurisprudence” of adult death penalty cases – emphasizing the avoidance of unwarranted death sentences via procedural rules – would not work for juveniles. Moreover, the recent high rates of jurisdictional waiver or transfer of adolescent offenders to adult court suggests that the boundary between the juvenile court – where the mitigating status of adolescence is internalized into the court’s jurisprudence²²⁵ – and the criminal court that ignores it, has been severely breached.²²⁶ The mitigation doctrine loses its case-by-case force where there is a flood of “waived” juveniles facing long and harsh terms of criminal punishments for crimes far less serious than murder.

If adolescent murderers are less culpable than their adult counterparts because of developmental deficits, and they are particularly vulnerable to false confessions and other limitations in adjudicative competence, then this immaturity places them well below the threshold of culpability articulated in the U.S. Supreme Court’s “death-is-different” jurisprudence. This applies to adolescents as a group that differs in its culpability for its offenses, not a simply as subgroup of criminal offenders. Accordingly, the presumption of immaturity can be applied to most individuals in the age group, based on predictable trajectories of adolescent development. Alternately, individualized assessments leave triers of fact at the mercy of imperfect diagnostic assessments to determine which adolescents are “mature” and which are not.

Moreover, categorical exemptions reduce the likelihood of racial or regional

Allen, Preface, in Fagan and Zimring, *THE CHANGING BORDERS OF JUVENILE JUSTICE*, supra n. 104. See also, Jeffrey Fagan, *This Will Hurt Me More Than It Hurts You: Social and Legal Consequences of Jurisdictional Transfer*, 16 NOTRE DAME JOURNAL OF LAW, ETHICS AND PUBLIC POLICY 101 (2002).

²²² See, for example, Barry C. Feld, *BAD KIDS* (1996), discussing a “youth discount” in the context of a unified criminal court that eliminates separate jurisdiction and jurisprudence for adolescents.

²²³ See, Steiker and Steiker, supra n. 129, for objections to the use of proportionality as a rationale to categorically exempt juveniles from capital punishment.

²²⁴ Scott and Steinberg, supra n. 151 (raising raising much the same argument).

²²⁵ Andrew Walkover, *The Infancy Defense in the New Juvenile Court*, 31 *UCLA L. REV.* 503, 510-12 (1984). See, also, Elizabeth Scott, *Legal Construction of Adolescence*, supra n.79.

²²⁶ Zimring and Fagan, *Transfer Policy*, Chapter 13 in Fagan and Zimring, *CHANGING BORDERS OF JUVENILE JUSTICE*, supra n. 104.

variation in the determination of who is death-worthy and who is not.²²⁷ This determination is even more complicated for juveniles than adults given the externalities that arise when juveniles commit well-publicized homicides.²²⁸ Recent data show for example, that there is an unavoidable conflation of race and homicide, raising further tensions in the search for justice.²²⁹ Indeed, the conflation of race and blameworthiness is a disturbing specter that unfortunately has a long and painful history in criminal justice.²³⁰ In capital cases, such determinations about culpability seem to fall more heavily on African Americans and other ethnic minorities,²³¹ and complicated by the structural circumstances that obstruct assignment of competent and experienced capital defense counsel.²³² It also insulates against the limitations of scientific instruments to accurately distinguish who is mature of judgment and who is not.²³³

In *Atkins*, the Court created a categorical exception for the mentally retarded because, like adolescents, their culpability is seriously diminished and the risk of false confession is high. Why, then, is there not a similar exception for adolescents? How can the law recognize and express the recognition of diminished responsibility among the less culpable mentally retarded who commit murder, but not of the less culpable juveniles who do the same? And if so, how?

²²⁷ Glen L. Pierce and Michael L. Radelet, *Race, Region and Death Sentencing in Illinois, 1988-97*, in Illinois Commission on Capital Punishment (2002) (available at http://www.idoc.state.il.us/ccp/ccp/reports/technical_appendix/research_report.html) (visited April 12, 2003).

²²⁸ See, for example, the case of Lionel Tate. Michael Browning et al., *Boy, 14, Gets Life in TV Wrestling Death: Killing of 6-Yr.-Old Playmate Wasn't Just Horseplay*, Florida Judge Says, Chi. Sun-Times, Mar. 10, 2001, at 1 (noting that the death occurred while Tate was "allegedly demonstrating wrestling techniques on her"); Dana Canedy, *At 14, a Life Sentence: Boy Killed Girl in 'Wrestling' Murder*, Dallas Morning News, Mar. 10, 2001, at 1.

²²⁹ See, Franklin E. Zimring, *AMERICAN YOUTH VIOLENCE* (2000); Barry C. Feld, *BAD KIDS*, supra note 105.

²³⁰ See, for example, Samuel Walker et al., *THE COLOR OF JUSTICE* (2001).

²³¹ Glen L. Pierce and Michael L. Radelet, *Race, Region and Death Sentencing in Illinois, 1988-97*, in Illinois Commission on Capital Punishment (2002) (available at http://www.idoc.state.il.us/ccp/ccp/reports/technical_appendix/research_report.html) (visited April 12, 2003).

²³² Incompetent defense counsel is the major source of serious trial error in capital cases, producing a corrosively high rate of sentencing and trial errors. See, James S. Liebman, Jeffrey Fagan, Andrew Gelman, et al., *A Broken System, Part II: Why There Is So Much Error in Capital Cases, and What Can Be Done About It*, Columbia University School of Law (2002) (available at www.law.columbia.edu/brokensystem2/, visited March 21, 2003).

²³³ See, generally, Scott and Steinberg, *Blaming Youth*, supra n.129.

IV. ATKINS AND THE MATURITY HEURISTIC OF THE DEATH PENALTY FOR JUVENILES

The categorical exception to capital punishment granted in *Atkins* should be applied to juveniles who commit murder. The competencies of to make decisions to engage in crime occupy common psychological ground with decisions made by those whose capacities are impaired by emotional disturbance or mental illness: susceptibility to or domination by peers, inability to control impulses, and the inability to grasp the consequences of their acts. Just as there is controversy, however, over measurement of mental retardation and determinations of the thresholds that apply,²³⁴ the components of “immaturity” among juveniles similarly invite similar complications both in terms of measurement and of clinical interpretation.

Drawing these boundaries poses both normative and scientific challenges. The difficulties and statistical error rates in measuring immaturity for juveniles invite complexity in the consistent application of the law.²³⁵ The emerging jurisprudence of mental retardation may well create the same tensions and dilemmas.²³⁶ The choice of a fixed boundary either for immature adolescents or mentally retarded adults brings with it another set of problems – the unacceptable risks of trial and sentencing errors that could lead to executions of those whose culpability fails to reach constitutional thresholds,²³⁷ or whose false confessions may

²³⁴ See, for example, *Wilson v. Maynard*, CIVIL ACTION NO. 0:02-2030-10BD, Memorandum of Law in Support of Motion for Partial Summary Judgment, July 15, 2002.

²³⁵ Steinberg and Cauffman, *supra* note 151 Adolescents are less competent decisionmakers than adults, largely because their capacities for autonomous choice, self-management, risk perception, responsibility, temperance, long-term perspective, and calculation of future consequences are deficient compared to adults, and these traits influence decisionmaking in ways that can lead to risky conduct. Scott and Steinberg, *Blaming Youth*, *supra* note 129 at 801.

²³⁶ James W. Ellis, [Mental Retardation And The Death Penalty: A Guide To State Legislative Issues](http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/MREllisLeg.pdf), available at <http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/MREllisLeg.pdf> (visited April 2, 2003); John Blume and Sheri Lynn Johnson, *Killing The Non-Willing: Atkins, The Volitionally Incapacitated, And The Death Penalty*, CORNELL L. REV. (2003, in press).

²³⁷ In *Gardner v. Florida* (97 S.Ct. 1197 (1977)), the U.S. Supreme Court once again emphasized the notion that “death is different.” In *Gardner*, the Court describes this difference: “From the point of view of the defendant, it is different in both its severity and its finality. From the point of view of society, the action of the sovereign in taking the life of one of its citizens also differs dramatically from any other legitimate state action” (*Garnder*, at 537-8). A death sentence and execution of a defendant whose culpability does not rise to this threshold is a sentencing error, that appellate courts are obligated to reverse. See, James S. Liebman, Jeffrey Fagan, Andrew Gelman, et al., *A Broken System, Part II: Why There Is So Much Error in Capital Cases, and What Can Be Done About It*, Columbia University School of Law (2002) (available at www.law.columbia.edu/brokensystem2/, visited March 21, 2003). The amount of adjudicated reversible error is a valid measure of whether the system is working in a satisfactory manner. *Id.*

lead to tragic and unthinkable miscarriages of justice.

The execution of an adolescent who is less than fully mature – whose capacity for choice is impaired by immaturity in the dimensions of cognitive and emotional development that adults have achieved – meet this definition of error. There is considerable variability in adolescent development, both between individuals for specific components of maturity,²³⁸ and within individuals for these same components. This variability in adolescent development means that by ages 17, 18 or perhaps even age 20, many will not reach the developmental thresholds of maturity on the markers of culpability established by *Atkins*, the same markers that have been validated and confirmed by social and emerging biological science of adolescent development as reliable predictors of full capacity for competent and mature behavioral choices.

Consider one developmental dimension – consequential judgment. Because the development of consequential judgment is a normal function, we have no reason to assume that the distribution of this or any other developmental competence is exceptional for youths engaged in criminal conduct. Indeed, we can assume a “normal” distribution of development. Typically, social science shows that the attainment of any feature of development follows a “normal” distribution,²³⁹ where most persons reach a threshold by a certain age – for example, 16 years, but some reach this threshold well before this age and others reach it well after this age. This type of distribution is known as a “bell-shaped curve,” and is characteristic of the distribution across populations of many features of social, psychological and physical development.²⁴⁰

Let us assume that on this measure, then, empirical studies show that the most teenagers reach the test score threshold of maturity (that is the generally accepted threshold of maturity for this dimension) at 16 years of age. That is, given a normal distribution, most teenagers – about two in three – have reached this threshold of maturity at that age.

²³⁸ Steinberg and Cauffman, *Maturity of Judgment in Adolescent Decision Making*, supra note 130 (discussing social science evidence that age-linked differences in maturity of judgment account for differences in decisionmaking).

²³⁹ On a “normal” or universal developmental measure, where the norms have been estimated from many studies under a variety of sampling and measurement conditions, we have no reason to assume that there will be large sample differences.

²⁴⁰ A bell-shaped curve represents the normal distribution of population values. See, for example, Schuyler W. Huck and William H. Cormier, *Reading Statistics and Research* (2d Ed. 1996). In a normal distribution, a few scores are at either end of the distribution, and most are in the middle grouped around the average (or mean) score. If one knows the mean and standard deviation (or variability) of a score or measure of developmental competency of persons at various ages, one can predict what percentage of the population is likely to have obtained that threshold by a specific age. The empirical rule for any normal distribution is: (1) 68% of the values fall within one standard deviation of the mean, (2) 95% of the values fall within two standard deviations of the mean, and (3) 99.7% of the values fall within three standard deviations of the mean. See, David H. Kaye and David A. Freeman, *Reference Guide on Statistics*, in *REFERENCE MANUAL ON SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE* (1994).

Accordingly, a considerable percentage – perhaps a third – of all adolescents have not fully matured on this dimension by age 16. Let us assume, also, that the standard deviation for this measure²⁴¹ – the spread in the distribution of ages at which adolescents reach the threshold of maturity for this specific dimension – is equivalent to approximately one year of age. That means that by age 17, perhaps one in six still is immature in this dimension of maturity. By age 18, perhaps one in 15 still lacks this specific capacity for choice and maturity of judgment.

But the heuristic of maturity becomes more complex when we recognize that several dimensions of adolescent development comprise maturity.²⁴² Now, consider that these several dimensions of psycho-social maturity are less than perfectly correlated, and cannot be substituted for one another.²⁴³ The determination of maturity then would require independent assessments over several dimensions. We can reasonably expect that the probability of reaching a threshold of maturity along several of these dimensions will require a complex calculation, where the joint or conditional probability of an adolescent reaching the accepted threshold of maturity along more than one dimension compounds and becomes increasingly small. Under current death penalty jurisprudence, each dimension of immaturity is a potential mitigator.²⁴⁴ The cumulative probability that a minor may be immature grows incrementally as a defendant falls farther and farther below the high threshold of culpability for a capital offense, increasing the risk of sentencing error under the U.S. Supreme Court's death penalty jurisprudence. The risk grows larger when we compound this calculus across several dimensions of maturity and culpability.

Although the law is otherwise comfortable with bright lines to legally define competencies for adolescents,²⁴⁵ the threshold for the attainment of sufficient maturity to attribute culpability *in capital cases* is a far more complex determination. Because what is at stake is death, the boundary cannot be determined simply by examining the average age by which most adolescents attain one or any number of the several indicia of maturity. In addition to these expected age thresholds, variability in the pace at which most adolescents reach that threshold is critical. Variability means that a substantial proportion of

²⁴¹ Standard deviation is a measure of the dispersion of a distribution of a test score or any measure around a mean. We assume that the distribution is “normal,” where the spread around the mean is equal on either side and the test scores are concentrated near the average. In a normal distribution, 68 percent of the cases lie within one standard deviation of the mean; approximately 16 percent lie one standard deviation or more below the mean. See, for example, Frank Hagan, *RESEARCH METHODS IN CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND CRIMINOLOGY* (4th ed.) 347-348 (1997).

²⁴² Steinberg and Cauffman, *supra* note 133; Scott and Grisso, *supra* n. 133

²⁴³ *Id.*

²⁴⁴ Unlike the determination of mental retardation which results in a diagnostic classification, immaturity is not classified using a similar heuristic. See, *Thompson v. Oklahoma*, *supra* n. 101

²⁴⁵ Scott, *Legal Construction of Adolescence*, *supra* n. 68

adolescents at ages 18, 17 or 16 are likely to score well below the threshold for maturity, including many of the the constituent elements of retardation identified in *Atkins*.²⁴⁶ That is, some non-negligible percentage of adolescent murderers will not have achieved the threshold of culpability that capital jurisprudence requires. A death sentence handed down to a defendant who is below 18 years of age and who is substantially immature in impulse control and emotional regulation, for example, might invite the most serious form of capital sentencing error – the condemnation of a youth whose culpability does not rise to constitutional standards – in perhaps 10 percent or more of the cases involving offenders below age 18 at the time of their crime. When the determination of culpability is compounded across multiple dimensions of immaturity, the denial of the reality of this variability in favor of an absolute threshold of maturity at 17 or even 16 years of age invites the prospect of fallibility – error – on at least one or more dimensions of mitigation tied to immaturity.

There is an obvious and important tension between this maturity heuristic and normative views of adulthood and maturity. Normative views might assign maturity for criminal culpability at a specific age, based on broad societal views of what capacities most adolescents have attained by that age. But the empirical reality of a progression of adolescent maturation that occurs variably over several dimensions or indicia of culpability, creates a complex calculus of maturity based on multiple dimensions of adolescent development. In fact, there are two normative tensions in this framework, one that reflects concerns over the execution of minors, and a second arising from concerns of death penalty advocates for penal proportionality. Tipping in one direction or the other has “legitimacy” costs – for opponents of the death penalty, the moral authority of law and legal institutions is threatened when capital punishment is imposed unjustly. For supporters of capital punishment, the moral authority of the criminal law is corroded when punishments do not scale proportionately to the severity of the crime or the culpability of the offender.²⁴⁷ A maturity heuristic offers a rationalization under current death penalty jurisprudence for withholding executions for offenders as old as 21, when the risk of error due to false claims of maturity declines to near zero.²⁴⁸ That is not the case now: under *Stanford*, and despite the immaturity of many adolescents at ages 16, 17 or even at 18, execution is permitted, inviting the risk of execution of adolescents whose immaturity renders them not fully culpable for their crimes.

²⁴⁶ *Atkins*, supra n. 1 at 317 and notes 23 and 24. See, also, social science evidence cited *supra* n. 24.

²⁴⁷ See, generally, David Beetham, *THE LEGITIMATION OF POWER* (1991); John Rawls, *A THEORY OF JUSTICE* (2nd ed.) (1999); George Fletcher, *RETHINKING CRIMINAL LAW* (1978); Franklin E. Zimring, *Penal Proportionality for Young Offenders*, supra n. 150; H.L.A. Hart, *PUNISHMENT AND RESPONSIBILITY*, cited in Scott and Steinberg, *Blaming Youth*, supra n. 173.

²⁴⁸ Except in cases of mental retardation or mental illness.

Resolution of this tension may come from the law's comfort with bright lines of maturity that apply to specific competencies. For many legally regulated areas, including those that require the skills associated with maturity, there is a generally accepted upper boundary of 18 for nearly all behavioral functions of adulthood.²⁴⁹ Many of these roles require mature judgment (i.e., voting, medical consent), others require behavioral regulation (i.e., drinking, military service). The states assign criminal liability to wrongdoing at no more than age 18, although many assign it at even younger ages for specific crimes. For some offenses and offenders, the threshold drops as low as 13 years of age.²⁵⁰ However, the elevated arrest rates of adolescents tried as adults may be a sign that the assumption of maturity that informs these legal policies evidently is flawed.²⁵¹

The balancing of tensions among this triad of normative concerns suggests that perhaps the norms of the *Kent*²⁵² and *Gault*²⁵³ eras of juvenile jurisprudence should apply to the threshold of capital culpability for adolescents. Not long ago, Justice Harry Blackmun noted how the tension between fundamental fairness and individualized judgments haunts the administration of the death penalty.²⁵⁴ The juvenile death penalty epitomizes this tension. Avoiding false assumptions about maturity that can easily lead to

²⁴⁹ Scott, *Legal Construction of Adolescence*, supra n. 78.

²⁵⁰ Patricia Torbet, Richard Gable, Hunter Hurst IV, Imogene Montgomery, Linda Szymanski, Douglas Thomas.. *State Responses to Serious and Violent Juvenile Crime: Research Report*. Washington, D.C.: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, National Center for Juvenile Justice (1996).

²⁵¹ See, for example, Jeffrey Fagan, *This Will Hurt Me More Than It Hurts You: Social and Legal Consequences of Jurisdictional Transfer*, 16 NOTRE DAME JOURNAL OF LAW, ETHICS AND PUBLIC POLICY 101 (2002). Recent studies on the responses of adolescent offenders subjected to criminal punishment show that they are more likely to be rearrested and re-incarcerated compared to similarly situated youths who are retained in the juvenile justice system. See, for example, Donna Bishop, *Juvenile Offenders in the Adult Criminal Justice System* 27 CRIME AND JUSTICE 81 (2000). Many state policies are designed simply to incapacitate youths who they see as dangerous, and are agnostic with respect to either their amenability to change or their maturity. Some policies view immaturity as an indicator of continued risk of offending. These arguments are orthogonal to the assessment of culpability in capital cases. The implication of higher recidivism rates is simply the over-prediction of dangerousness based on an equivalence of criminality with dangerousness and maturity, and the toxic reaction of adolescents to harsh, non-therapeutic retributive regimes of correctional intervention. See, Fagan, *Social and Legal Consequences of Waiver*, Id.

²⁵² *Kent v. United States*, 383 U.S. 541 (1966)

²⁵³ *In re Gault*, 385 U.S. 965 (1966).

²⁵⁴ Justice Harry Blackmun, in *Callins v. Collins* 114 S.Ct. 1127, 1129 (1994) (Mem) "This is not to say that the problems with the death penalty today are identical to those that were present 20 years ago. Rather, the problems that were pursued down one hole with procedural rules and verbal formulas have come to the surface somewhere else, just as virulent and pernicious as they were in their original form."

sentencing errors in capital sentences, maintaining popular demand for penal proportionality, and sustaining consistency in the threshold for attainment of maturity and criminal liability, should lead the Court to the conclusion that juveniles should be afforded the same protection by the Court that the mentally retarded were given in *Atkins*.

V. CONCLUSIONS

Juveniles and mentally retarded persons are two groups who face substantial risk of sentencing error when facing the death penalty. Beyond the fact that their disabilities are mitigating factors in assessing criminal conduct, these disabilities place each group at substantial risk for providing false confessions,²⁵⁵ as well as limiting their ability to competently and, to use the language of *Atkins*, meaningfully assist defense counsel.²⁵⁶ Because defendants with diminished competence and culpability face an elevated likelihood of reversible sentencing error, principles of proportionality should govern these situations. Accordingly, juvenile defendants, like the mentally retarded, should be exempted from capital punishment.²⁵⁷

This is a narrowing argument, not a normative one about the moral status of the law of capital punishment. That is, a categorical exemption juveniles below the age of 18 from execution is agnostic about capital punishment for those whose maturity and competence reaches societal norms. The alternative – creating exempted categories such as the immature or the mentally retarded – invites disputes about how to reliably establish membership. Although legislatures and appellate courts can create language that scientifically and reliably expresses the underlying complexity and dimensionality of these categories, there inevitably will be subjective risks of misdiagnosis, testing error, instrument unreliability, or other limits of behavioral science.

In the case of juveniles, the significance of “immaturity” as a mitigating factor in criminal punishment can be reinforced by placing it in the context of its broader role in the legal regulation of adolescence, and the law’s comfort with bright lines. Here, then, the reconciliation of normative views of deserved and proportional punishment with social science evidence of diminished culpability and variability of adolescents in reaching the thresholds of maturity can reinforce the jurisprudential logic of a ban on executions of youths who commit murder below 18 years of age.

²⁵⁵ *Atkins* at 320, note 25.

²⁵⁶ *Id* at 304 (“...mentally retarded defendants in the aggregate face a special risk of wrongful execution because of the possibility that they will unwittingly confess to crimes they did not commit, their lesser ability to give their counsel meaningful assistance, and the facts that they are typically poor witnesses and that their demeanor may create an unwarranted impression of lack of remorse for their crimes”).

²⁵⁷ Steiker and Steiker, *supra* n. at 129.

This exemption is would avoid many of the of errors that characterize the “broken system” of capital punishment that is so riddled with serious, reversible error.²⁵⁸ The empirical reality of capital sentencing suggests that current procedures and jurisprudence are not reliable in sorting out who is or is not sufficiently culpable. Even when individualized assessments are conducted using modern scientific and clinical tools, the risks of error due to measurement and diagnostic limitations suggests that it is neither reliable nor efficient for each Court to assess the competency of each juvenile individually. The precise conditions of immaturity, incapacity, and incompetency are difficult to consistently and fairly express in a capital sentencing context.²⁵⁹ Further, cognitive and volitional immaturity might be easily concealed by demeanor or physical appearance, and more importantly, obscured by the gruesome details of a murder and its emotional impact on the victim’s family. These limitations invite an attribution of culpability to the seemingly remorseless and competent adolescent whose developmental reality may be exactly the opposite, raising the risk of a death sentence where it is not deserved.²⁶⁰

The U.S. Supreme Court’s interest in procedural reliability and fairness calls for action to reduce high risks of sentencing errors. One critical area requiring further attention is the execution of juveniles, where care and caution are needed to reinforce the judicial system’s legitimacy. The Missouri Supreme Court is the first to extend the logic of *Atkins* to adolescence and ban the execution of persons who commit murder before reaching age eighteen.²⁶¹ In reversing the death sentence of Christopher Simmons in *Simmons v. Roper*²⁶², the Missouri court located its decision in the intersection of jurisprudential theories that recognize the diminished capacity of adolescents with the multiple theories of the *Atkins* Court. That is, the *Simmons* Court cited the broad acceptance of the immaturity of adolescents articulated by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Eddings* and *Thompson*, and

²⁵⁸ James S. Liebman, Jeffrey Fagan, et al., *A Broken System II: Why There Is So Much Error in Capital Cases, and What Can Be Done About It*, <http://www.law.columbia.edu/brokensystem2/>; James S. Liebman, Jeffrey Fagan, Valerie West, and Jonathan Lloyd, “Capital Attrition: Error Rates in Capital Cases, 1973-1995,” 78 *Texas Law Review* 1839 (2000) (describing the system of prosecution and sentencing in capital cases as “broken” due to the very high rates of serious, reversible trial error, averaging 68% in all documented state direct appeal, state post-conviction appeal, and federal habeas corpus decisions from 1973-95).

²⁵⁹ Steiker and Steiker, *supra* n. 129 at 101.

²⁶⁰ See, for example, Martha Grace Duncan, *So Young and So Untender: Remorseless Children and the Expectations of the Law* 102 COLUM. L. REV. 1469, 1520-22 (2002).

²⁶¹ *State ex rel. Christopher Simmons, Petitioner v. Donald P. Roper, Superintendent, Potosi Correctional Center, Respondent*, Missouri Supreme Court, SC84454, August 26, 2003 (Justice W.R. Price, Jr., dissenting).

²⁶² The Missouri court resentenced Simmons to life imprisonment without possibility of release.

noted that the risks of false confession attached to juveniles due to the similarity of their cognitive deficits that informed the *Atkins* decision. Again invoking *Atkins*, the *Simmons* Court found that such executions violated the U.S. Constitution's prohibition of cruel and unusual punishment. The *Simmons* court noted that many adolescents may lack the moral development and reasoning capacity necessary to satisfy the requirements in capital jurisprudence of sufficient mental capacity to meet the threshold of "deterrence."

The *Simmons* Court also addressed the test of the U.S. Supreme Court in *Stanford* that there exist a "a national consensus has developed against the execution of juvenile offenders," and the similar challenge issued in *Penry*. The *Simmons* Court's opinion noted that since the U.S. Supreme Court's 1989 decision in *Stanford*, no state has lowered the age for execution from 18 to 17 or 16, five more states have banned the practice of executing juvenile offenders through legislative action, and a sixth has banned it through a judicial decision. Including the Missouri decision, a total of seventeen states, in addition to federal courts, require a minimum age of eighteen for a death sentence. The Court also noted that the infrequency of execution of juveniles – only six states have executed a juvenile since *Stanford* – as further evidence of this emerging national consensus.²⁶³ The *Simmons* Court also recognized international standards, rejected 14 years ago in *Stanford*, citing the Convention on the Rights of the Child in its decision.²⁶⁴

Atkins has established a critical path for honoring principles of fairness while retaining the core jurisprudential theories of immaturity, incapacity and mitigation in capital punishment. Extending the Court's *Atkins* reasoning to sentencing determinations for juveniles not only maintains the integrity of the Court's *Atkins* decision, it more importantly reduces the risk of executing children who are less than fully culpable for their crimes.

²⁶³ The *Simmons* Court also noted that 12 states and the District of Columbia bar the death penalty entirely.

²⁶⁴ *Simmons*, 12 S.W. 3d at 40, (citing Article 37(a) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the same article the court cites in its opinion, provides that "[n]either capital punishment nor life imprisonment without possibility of release shall be imposed for offenses committed by persons below eighteen years of age." Convention of the Rights of the Child, United Nations, Nov. 20, 1989, art37(a), U.N. at <http://www.unher.ch/html/menu2/6/crc/treaties/crc.htm> (last visited Oct. 6, 2003). See, also Geogre J. Annas, *Moral Progress, Mental Retardation, and the Death Penalty*, 347 NEW ENGLAND JOURNAL OF MEDICINE 1814, 1817 (2002) (predicting that the public will support an extension of the *Atkins* decision to adolescents charged with murders committed at ages 16 or 17).