

14. AFFLUENZA

Ethan Couch, a 16-year-old Texan, crashed his pickup truck into a group of people while driving with a blood alcohol level three times the legal limit. He killed four people near a disabled car by the road and seriously injured two of seven youths riding in his truck. Judge Jean Boyd sentenced Couch to a lockdown rehabilitation facility and ten years probation. He will face a ten-year jail sentence if he drinks alcohol, uses drugs, or drives while on probation.

The media fanned international controversy by picking up on defense expert testimony given by a psychologist. The psychologist claimed that Couch was the victim of “affluenza,” that he was incapable of good judgment due to lack of limits set by his wealthy parents. Observers, victims, and the victims’ families were appalled that Couch received such a light sentence. They claimed that the judge was influenced by the affluenza defense and allowed a spoiled rich kid’s parents to buy him a pass on real punishment.

Texas courts are guided by research indicating that rehabilitation is more productive than punishment in dealing with minors who commit “unintentional” crimes. The judge’s ruling is consistent with other Texas rulings. Critics of the Judge Boyd’s sentencing wonder if a stricter punishment would better fit the severity of crime.

Ethan’s family settled a civil suit by one teen who was paralyzed by the crash who will require lifelong round-the-clock care. Families of the other dead and injured victims have also filed civil suits for damages. In an interesting twist, Couches parents had volunteered to pay for a \$450,000-a-year treatment facility in California, but Couch was directed to a state facility in Texas. There the charges are \$260,000 a year but state tax subsidy will pay 95% of that fee leaving the parents to pay \$14,040.