

A Public Safety Failure

How the death penalty fails to deter crime

Many law enforcement officials say the death penalty wastes scarce crime prevention resources. The time spent chasing a handful of executions means countless other crimes go unsolved. The death penalty does not deter acts of violence and it siphons resources from effective tools that do. Many law enforcement officials say the death penalty is only a distraction from their goal of public safety.

The death penalty diverts scarce resources from crime prevention

“The death penalty is certainly not an effective law enforcement tool. Effective law enforcement and crime prevention requires precious resources that are being wasted on this ineffective and broken program. In times of fiscal crisis the programs that fail to achieve their own goals should be the first to go.”

– Ken Jones, 33-year veteran of Illinois’ Cook County Police Department

“If the millions of dollars currently spent on the death penalty were spent on investigating unsolved homicides, modernizing crime labs and expanding effective violence prevention programs, our communities would be much safer.”

– Ray Samuels, former Police Chief of Newark, California

“It is just absurd that we would pull officers from the streets and at the same time spend millions of dollars to have a death penalty system that has not been proven to prevent crime.”

– Daryl K. Roberts, former Police Chief of Hartford, Connecticut

Executions keep murder rates... high?

- ♦ A simple comparison reveals that states without the death penalty actually have lower murder rates than those with the death penalty. The South has over 80% of the nation’s executions, yet the highest murder rate in the U.S. That region also accounts for more law enforcement officers killed than any other region in the last 15 years.
- ♦ The experience of individual states confirms the data. The number of homicides in New York is at its lowest level in decades, even though the state has been without a death penalty since 2005.
- ♦ In New Jersey the murder rate dropped two years in a row after the death penalty was repealed, with Camden, NJ reaching its lowest level of violent crime since 1969.

Deterrence is a myth – and people know it

- ♦ The National Research Council reviewed more than three decades of research and found no credible evidence that the death penalty deters.
- ♦ This isn't surprising: to the extent someone with a deadly weapon in a rage is going to be deterred from anything, the real prospect of spending a lifetime in prison is at least as persuasive as the small chance of getting executed.
- ♦ A 2009 study found 88% of the nation's top criminologists believe the death penalty is not a deterrent. Nearly two-thirds of the American people agree, according to recent polling.
- ♦ Even police officers do not believe the death penalty is an effective deterrent. Police chiefs ranked the death penalty *last* among effective ways to reduce violent crime in a 2009 survey. A full 99% said that changes such as reducing drug abuse or improving the economy were more important than the death penalty in reducing violent crime.

"I have experienced countless violent crime scenes... Of the accused murderers my fellow officers and I have brought to justice, I do not believe any of them was deterred in the least by Nebraska's death penalty."

*– Police Sergeant
Jim Davidsaver, 20-year
veteran of the Lincoln, NE
Police Department*

Law enforcement see the death penalty's other flaws up close

- ♦ Law enforcement officials see first-hand the wide range of things that go wrong in capital cases. Even with the best intentions, police officers, lab technicians, prosecutors, judges, and witnesses can make mistakes or errors in judgment. Some law enforcement are saying that has changed their minds about the death penalty.
- ♦ Corrections officers and wardens who have participated in executions have found the experience takes a toll. From Texas to Mississippi to New York, they have experienced mental health problems, alcohol abuse, and have even committed suicide from the stress of carrying out the death penalty.

We've learned a lot about the death penalty in the last 30 years. It does not deter crime. It actually makes us less safe by siphoning resources from programs that actually do reduce crime. A growing number of law enforcement officials believe there are better ways to keep us safe.