

CAPITAL PUNISHMENT: A SOCIO-CULTURAL OVERVIEW



Changing machinery of execution:
from electric chair to gas chamber
to lethal injection.

Records indicate that since the early 1600s at least 19,246 people have been legally executed in this country by hanging, burning, firing squad, electrocution, gas, and lethal injection.¹ The mode of execution and the ritual of punishment have evolved from spectacles of public hanging to private viewings of lethal injection, reflecting society's shifting notions of appropriate retribution. Today Americans are almost split in their opinion about capital punishment. The latest Gallup poll (May 2003) shows that 53% support the death penalty while 44% favor life in prison without parole. The following explores key aspects of the debate:

Is the death penalty an appropriate punishment?

Proponents believe that death sentences must and should be meted out to the worst criminals not only to protect society from lawlessness by preventing crime through the demonstration of the consequences of committing felonies, but also to ensure a just retribution for the most heinous of crimes both for families of victims and society at large. Opponents counter that state-sanctioned violence teaches violence as an appropriate means of conflict resolution, pointing out that abolitionist states have among the lowest murder rates in the country², and that taking a human life is morally wrong no matter what the crime.

What are the economic costs of the death penalty?

Opponents point to studies that conclude, in considering the trial and appeals processes, the costs of a capital case that ends in execution are considerably higher than life in prison without parole.³ Proponents fundamentally object to the state paying for the care and comfort of the worst criminals for whom rehabilitation is impossible.

Is there a danger of taking an innocent life?

Proponents argue that the judicial system, with its extensive appeal process and availability of up-to-date technologies, has adequate protection against executing an innocent person. Critics contend that the judicial process is fundamentally flawed. They point to the increasing number of people released from death row after proving their innocence, often with the help of DNA evidence and through the work of activists outside the legal system, not those within it.

What about The Bible and "an eye for an eye"?

Puritans took their capital laws directly from the bible, maintaining that the failure to execute an offender would bring the wrath of God to society as a whole. By contrast, at the end of the 18th century, reformers relied on the bible to argue against capital punishment, painting a picture of a forgiving and loving God. To this day the bible is used in defense of and in opposition to capital punishment.

Is the death penalty discriminatory?

Opponents argue that the criminal justice system perpetuates the problems of a society that ignores racism and poverty by targeting the poor and minorities, those most lacking of financial resources to defend their trials, resulting in a disproportionate number of executions and sentences involving minorities. Proponents believe that the disproportionate number of minorities on death row reflects those who are committing crimes, not the percentage of minorities in the population.

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1. The database is available on the website of the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (www.icpsr.umich.edu). 2. FBI Uniform Crime Reports
3. A recent Duke University study notes that a capital case that ends in execution costs the state of North Carolina \$2.6 million more than life in prison without parole.