
Washington's Death Penalty: Wasteful and Inefficient

“Spending all this money on the death penalty might be worth it—if it actually made our communities safer. But it doesn’t...Our communities would be exponentially better off by reinvesting the time, money and resources we spend on trying to get a few people executed into crime prevention measures that work”

--Norm Stamper, Former Seattle Police Chief

The death penalty costs millions

The Washington State Bar Association’s 2006 study estimated that a death penalty case costs an *additional* \$800,000 over a similar non-death penalty case. It costs so much because a life is on the line and the court cases are therefore much more rigorous with more lawyers, witnesses, experts, a longer jury selection process and more motions racking up the cost before the first appeal is even filed.

The counter-intuitive truth

The death penalty costs more than a sentence of life without the possibility of parole, even when accounting for housing, health care, and feeding a prisoner for life. The complicated and necessary legal processes that make up capital punishment trials make it much more expensive. In Washington state, all capital defendants also have the constitutional right to appeal after conviction. Once the state level proceedings are concluded, federal law grants all capital defendants the right to have their cases reviewed in the federal courts. This slows down justice and wastes valuable resources—both time and money.

Those millions could be better spent to make Washington safer

People often think that the death penalty makes us safer, but if the money were spent on more law enforcement, a better prison system, and other proven public safety measures, we would be safer. If the time spent on capital trials were spent on investigating, prosecuting, sentencing and preventing other crimes, we would be safer. For example, Thurston County spent so much time and money on the Mitchell Rupe case, they did not have the resources to deal with overcrowding in their jail, meaning that other criminals were released early.

The extensive appeals and motions are paid at the taxpayers' expense

Since most capital defendants are too poor to afford an attorney, the taxpayer picks up the costs for the defense *and* the prosecution. Thousands of lawyer hours are accumulated, all coming out of state and local budgets. The Washington State Legislature established the Extraordinary Criminal Justice Assistance Account in 1999, with tens of millions of dollars have been requested to help with capital prosecutions. Smaller counties often do not want such a case tried in their courthouse for fear it will bankrupt them.

We cannot make it cheaper

The extraordinary expenses of the death penalty are legally mandated to reduce the risks of executing an innocent person, since so many capital trials are found to have significant legal errors in them. Even so, the number of exonerations from death row across the country is approaching 150, including one here in Washington state.

In today's economic environment where the state faces significant budget shortfalls year after year, should we not hold the death penalty to the same cost-benefit analysis held to other state programs? The millions of dollars that Washington taxpayers have paid to seek the death penalty could have been spent on increasing the number of police on the streets, solving cold cases, or resolving our over-populated prison problem. **It's time to evaluate whether or not death penalty is worth the price.**