

Washington's Death Penalty: Why It Needs To End

We've learned a lot about the death penalty in the last 35 years

For more than three decades, Washington has tinkered with the death penalty in an effort to make it fair, accurate, and effective. Yet the system continues to fail.

The risk of executing an innocent person is real

Over 135 men have been exonerated from death rows around the country. Here in Washington, Benjamin Harris spent 12 years on death row for a crime he did not commit before he was exonerated. Evidence we once thought reliable, like eyewitness identification, is not always accurate. DNA evidence has led to hundreds of exonerations, including several death row cases, but it's not available in most cases. Despite our best intentions, human beings simply can't be right 100% of the time. When a life is on the line, one mistake is one too many.

Fairness in the death penalty is a moving target

We expect justice to be blind—otherwise it's not justice at all. Yet poor defendants can't access the most experienced, professional lawyers. Geography and race often determine who lives and dies, and after 35 years we haven't found a way to make the system less arbitrary. Efforts to fix the system in Washington have just made it more complex—not more fair.

The complicated process has drained our resources

The death penalty is longer and more complicated because a life is on the line—shortcuts could mean an irreversible mistake. For this reason, the death penalty costs millions more dollars than a system of life without parole—before a single appeal is even filed. The time spent pursuing one capital case in Washington could solve and prosecute scores of other non-capital cases, removing the threat of violent criminals from our streets.

The death penalty has failed victims' families

The longer process prolongs the pain of victims' families, who must relive their trauma as courts repeat trials and hearings, trying to get it right. Most cases result in a life sentence in the end anyway—but only after the family has suffered years of uncertainty. To be meaningful, justice should be swift and sure—but the death penalty is just the opposite.

Washington is ready

The mounting evidence of waste, inaccuracy, and bias has shattered public confidence in the criminal justice system. Public support for the death penalty has dropped in favor of life without parole. Across the country, states are reconsidering their death penalty statutes, as should Washington. The death penalty is dying. Washingtonians are ready to see it go.