

# The Facts:

## Basic Information on the Death Penalty

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### **Tough on Crime?**

*States without the death penalty have a significantly lower homicide rate than states with the death penalty.*

Something must be done to decrease violent crime. But the death penalty is not the solution; it is only an easy answer for politicians who want to seem tough on crime. For many years studies have shown that the death penalty simply does not deter crime—and it may even encourage it, especially among prisoners like those in Washington seeking suicide at the hands of the state. Life imprisonment without the possibility of parole, a sentence we already have in Washington, effectively removes murderers from society.

### **Expense**

*In 2000, Washington's chief judge added to the many previous studies showing that sending a prisoner to execution is several times more expensive than sending and keeping that prisoner in jail for life. This is true around the country. Florida spends an average of \$3.2 million to execute an inmate, six times more than it spends to keep a person in prison for life.*

Many states have discovered that death sentences are an extreme burden on their budgets. Most costs are for the trial stage, not appeals. The state pays for judges, court-appointed lawyers, expert witnesses, and more. Meanwhile, states cut social services, take police off the streets and release prisoners early for lack of money. Okanogan County, Washington, laid off half its public-health nurses and couldn't afford to replace aging police equipment because of just the pre-trial expenses for one death-penalty case. Why risk public safety on a penalty that doesn't deter crime?

### **Racist, Random, and Unreasonable**

*Over 85% of those executed between 1976 and 1996 were convicted of killing whites, while half of all homicide victims during that time were people of color.*

In 1972, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Furman v. Georgia* that the death penalty was unconstitutional because sentencing was random, racist and unreasonable. Yet not much has changed since then. Only a tiny fraction of those convicted of homicide are sentenced to death. Justice Blackmun called race a major factor in choosing who will die. The late Supreme Court Justice William Douglas commented, "One searches in vain for the execution of a member of the affluent strata of our society."

### **Execution of Innocent People**

*From 1973 through mid-2002, 102 people have been released from death row with evidence of their innocence. During this time, it's likely that several innocent prisoners have been executed.*

The Supreme Court has limited federal review of cases and ruled that it is constitutional to execute an innocent person as long as there were no legal errors in the original trial. Many states refuse to admit new evidence only a few weeks or months after the trial ends. It is almost impossible to win a new trial with new evidence. Human error is inevitable. And, with the death penalty, mistakes are irreversible.

How many innocent people are we willing to sacrifice? Changes to federal law in 1996, and the widespread problem of poor defense lawyering in Washington and around the country, make execution of the innocent an ever-present risk. The scholars Bedau and Radelet state that 23 innocent prisoners were executed in the United States between 1900 and 1985.

## **Victims' Families**

*"An evil deed is not redeemed by an evil deed of retaliation." — Coretta Scott King, widow of assassination victim.*

Many people argue that we owe it to the victims' families to execute murderers. But not all victims' families support the death penalty. Many believe that executing the murderer does nothing to relieve the pain and does not bring back the victim, but only continues the cycle of violence. Imposing the death penalty often prolongs their suffering for years. As the public's attention is focused on revenge during each appeal and each devastating execution date, the victim's family's need to heal and move beyond the tragedy is ignored.

## **Why do we kill people to show that killing people is wrong?**

Executions are more premeditated than murders and many times more gruesome. By sanctioning state killing, we promote homicide as acceptable in certain cases. We arouse violent emotions. Murder levels sometimes increase immediately following executions. We don't punish other crimes by subjecting the perpetrator to the crime that was committed. We must ask ourselves why the United States still carries out the death penalty when almost every other industrialized country has abolished it, and when most major American religious denominations oppose it.

## **Washington's Death Penalty**

Washington is one of 38 states in the U.S. with the death penalty. (Twelve states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico forbid it, as do all of Western Europe, Canada, Mexico and almost all of Latin America.) Following the execution of James Elledge, ten men are under sentence of death in Washington. Washington bans the execution of the mentally retarded or of juvenile offenders. Prisoners are now executed by lethal injection unless they choose hanging. There have been 77 executions in the state since 1904, the most recent being Jeremy Sagastegui on October 13, 1998, and James Elledge on August 28, 2001.

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## **Washington Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty**

The Washington Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty is composed of individuals and organizations throughout the state. Founded in 1984, WCADP is dedicated to public education and activism. WCADP provides information on the death penalty, publishes a quarterly newsletter, maintains contact with those on death row, provides speakers, works with the legislature and media, organizes events and campaigns, and presents an annual Abolition Day Dinner.

Volunteers are the backbone of WCADP. They plan and carry out activities, write letters to elected officials and newspapers, and do administrative work.

Interested individuals and organizations are encouraged to join WCADP. In addition to receiving our newsletter, members receive announcements of events and campaigns. They also receive the satisfaction of knowing they are helping to end violence and injustice in our society.