

## Should The Death Penalty be Abolished?

The Supreme Court has increasingly restricted the use of capital punishment

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The execution chamber at Washington State Penitentiary

### YES

When the United States was founded more than two centuries ago, capital punishment was commonplace in the 13 Colonies, as well as in England and across Europe.

Today, more than two thirds of the world's countries, including virtually all of Europe, have abolished the death penalty. It's time for the U.S. to follow this trend: The death penalty is a fundamentally flawed public policy that has outlived any usefulness it may once have had.

Since 1976, at least 142 people have been freed from death row after evidence of their innocence emerged, proving that the system is prone to human error.

Furthermore, the death penalty discriminates on the basis of race, income level, and geography. Death sentences are more likely to be handed down when the murder victim is white. People who can afford good lawyers generally don't receive death sentences. And because only some states use the death penalty, the same crime is punished differently depending on where it occurs.

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Because death penalty trials and appeals are so lengthy, it can take years before executions are carried out, burdening taxpayers with huge costs. Of the more than 3,100 people now on death row in the U.S., hundreds have been there more than 20 years—and many are not close to execution.

Alternative sentences are available to punish the guilty and keep our communities safe. Taxpayer dollars could be better spent on crime prevention and to support those harmed by violence. It's time for the U.S. to join the international community by abandoning this medieval form of punishment. •

**—DIANN RUST-TIERNEY, Executive Director  
National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty**

### NO

Capital punishment is an extreme sanction that is properly reserved for the worst of the worst: serial killers like Ted Bundy and terrorists like Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh.

During the first decade of the 21st century, there were 26 percent more executions in the U.S. than in the last decade of the 20th century. During the same time period, the U.S. murder rate decreased by 24 percent. Several academic studies show a clear deterrent effect from judicious use of the death penalty.

Opponents claim that there are innocent people on death row. While that may be true, the number of innocent people who have been executed is zero. The reason is that in every state with capital punishment, convicted murderers automatically go through a series of appeals that result in an average 12-year delay between sentence and execution. Beyond that, DNA testing can now establish with virtual certainty in many cases whether an individual is, in fact, the killer.

On the other hand, there are hundreds of innocent victims who died because we allowed convicted murderers to get out of prison.

Some claim life without parole is an appropriate alternative to the death penalty. But a key reason many killers agree to accept sentences of life without parole in plea deals is the specter of a death sentence.

If we can establish that a killer is absolutely guilty and has a track record that suggests he will seriously hurt or kill again, what do we say to his future victims if we allow him to live? We need capital punishment for those rare cases in which a killer is beyond redemption. •

**—JOSHUA MARQUIS, District Attorney  
Clatsop County, Oregon**

**DNA testing can now establish with virtual certainty if someone is guilty.**