The Real Costs of Death

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1802 Words
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The death penalty has existed in history since the beginning of law itself. In the United States, it has raised cause for much debate. Those in favor of the death penalty can usually be heard making the argument that it costs more to keep an inmate alive in prison as opposed to executing them. Others in favor of the death penalty have the opinion that it is a deterrent of crime. Those opposed to the death penalty can be heard making the argument that too many innocent men have unjustly been put to death and it is not proven to be effective. Whatever side of the argument a person may fall on, the facts will still remain undeniable and even shocking to some. The death penalty has claimed innocent lives, is not effective as a deterrent and costs substantially more than a sentence of life without parole therefore it should be abolished in all 50 states except for in very special circumstances.

Currently in the United States there are 32 states where the death penalty is authorized in. A person who receives the death penalty, must commit a crime that fits a specific criterion. Such things are taken into consideration such as the gravity of offense, age, intellectual capacity, criminal history, nature of the punishment, state offense occurred and how other states punish the crime the person was convicted of (McCurley, 2015). When someone is sentenced to the death penalty the evidence provided must be overwhelming and without doubt. The court however has made many indisputable mistakes in the past. These mistakes have cost an immeasurable amount of time, money, and lives. Since 1973, there have been 162 cases where an inmate sentenced to death row was acquitted of all related crimes (Death Penalty Information Center, n.d. -a). The last related case occurred this year on April 17, 2018 (Death Penalty Information Center, n.d. -a). The man who was exonerated was convicted in 1993 (Death Penalty Information Center, n.d. -a).
This man happened to be part of the 1.6 percent of inmates exonerated since 1973 (Levy, 2016). Almost 25 years of his life were spent in prison due to a conviction based on false charges. Although he may have lost many precious years in prison, he is still alive. A Study by the National Academy of Sciences has found that the innocence rate is at around 4.1 percent (as cited in Levy, 2016). This study suggests that 1 out of 25 inmates are sentenced for a crime they did not commit. The disparity from the 1.6 percent exonerated to the 4.1 percent innocence rate shows that there are inmates being put to death in the United States for crimes they did not commit. Innocent lives should not be taken because of a flaw in the system. In order to ensure that, life without parole is the clear choice for sentencing.

Those that are for the death penalty generally use the reasoning in their arguments that it deters crime. In 2016 7 out of the top 10 states that led the country in murders were states with the death penalty. The top two being California and Texas in that order (Dillinger, 2015). Third on the 2016 list of states that led the country in murders was Florida (Dillinger, 2015). California, Texas and Florida are the top three most populated states in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). An argument could be made that the reason there are more murders in these states is due to the higher population count which is residing in said states. A counter argument could be made that New York, the fourth most populated state, is three states removed from Florida in number of murders (Dillinger, 2015). The way to effectively compare and contrast would be to use homicide rates. Homicide rates are calculated by finding the number of homicides in relation to number of people in the area. For instance, if one community has only 1,000 people and there were 5 homicides that would be stark difference to community with 100,000 people and 5 homicides. By using these rates, one can determine if the death penalty is a deterrent for homicide in the states that it occurs in. “During the last 20 years, the homicide rate
in states with the death penalty has been 48% - 101% higher than in states without the death penalty” (Death Penalty Information Center, n.d. -b). These numbers alone demonstrate and lead to a legitimately convincing argument in which the death penalty has not truly helped in deterring people from committing murder over the last 20 years.

When comparisons are made between states with the death penalty and states without, the majority of death penalty states show murder rates higher than non-death penalty states. The average of murder rates per 100,000 population in 1999 among death penalty states was 5.5, whereas the average of murder rates among non-death penalty states was only 3.6 (Death Penalty Information Center, n.d. -b).

To put that into perspective, in 1999 there were 65% more homicides in states that have the death penalty as opposed to those that do not have it. In 2016 things have remained unchanged. The chart below illustrates the murder rate in both states that have and states that do not have the death penalty from 2008-2016.

All information in the chart was derived from the Death Penalty Information Center (Death Penalty Information Center, n.d. –e).
The Green line is the average murder rate for all states. The red line which is representing all of the death penalty states that have been above the national average since 2008. Non-death penalty states have consistently been below the average. Based on the data above one could infer that the death penalty is not a deterrent to murder.

If the numbers above do not make the case to abolish the death penalty then all a lawmaker would have to do is look at the costs. An argument from those that are for the death penalty say that the taxpayer should not have to foot the bill to keep a criminal alive for the rest of their life in prison. One would think that executing a prisoner would be substantially cheaper than the alternative. However, according to new research anyone who has made this assumption would actually be incorrect. Donald McMartin, known as the Hanging Judge of Orange County says “it's 10 times more expensive to kill them than to keep them alive" (as cited in Erb, 2014). The main method of execution is through lethal injection. The inmate is injected with sodium thiopental, pancuronium bromide, and potassium chloride in a way to cause respiratory and cardiac arrest while the inmate is without consciousness (Death Penalty Information Center, n.d. -c). The drugs themselves cost on average $100 although, the exact costs are not know because the pharmaceutical companies keep them private (Erb, 2014). The real costs are coming from court. “Before an offender can be sentenced to death, the Eighth Amendment also requires an individualized sentencing process—meaning a law cannot impose a mandatory or automatic death sentence upon conviction” (Pirius, 2015). Because of this, capital cases are lengthy and cost much more money than their counterparts (Erb, 2014). When the death penalty is off the table, it can cut the costs of defense by 400% (Erb.2014). Without trial because of guilty plea,
death penalty cases still cost 2x more than cases with a sentence of life without parole (Erb, 2014). Richard C. Deiter of the non-partisan Death Penalty Information Center has said “Death-penalty trial costs $1 million more than one in which prosecutors seek life without parole” (as cited in Erb, 2014). The numbers are staggering. “New York State projected that the death penalty costs the state $1.8 million per case just through trial and initial appeal (Erb, 2014). The man hours alone are costing taxpayers a fortune. “[I]n Idaho, the State Appellate Public Defenders office spent about 44 times more time on a typical death penalty appeal than on a life sentence appeal” (Erb,2014). The amount of time and money spent on defending these cases is mind-blowing to say the least. Death penalty cases cost on average almost $500,000 in additional cost versus those without the death penalty (Erb, 2014). This is excluding cost of court personnel. “Even when a trial wasn't necessary (because of a guilty plea), those cases where the death penalty was sought still cost about twice as much as those where death was not sought” (Erb 2014). A study by Duke University has shown it costs North Carolina $2.16 million per execution (as cited in Death Penalty Information Center, n.d. -d). According to the Palm Beach Post, it costs $51 million more a year to enforce the death penalty in Florida as opposed to life without parole (as cited in Death Penalty Information Center, n.d. -d). If that wasn’t fiscally detrimental enough, factor in the housing of death row inmates to further the argument of cost. It costs on average more than double to house death row inmates as opposed to their general population counter parts (Erb, 2014). The amount of money that could be saved by a sentence of life without parole as opposed to the death penalty shows why the former is the clear choice. Any lawmaker has looked at the numbers would have seen that the death penalty results in irresponsible spending by each state that it is in effect.
The death penalty is currently still in effect in 32 states across the country. Whether someone is for or against the death penalty many things must be considered before swaying to one side. Those things that should not be overlooked or disregarded are the innocent lives that have been lost, the effectiveness it serves as a deterrent and the total costs. According to the research, the death penalty has taken one too many innocent lives, has not been proven as an effective deterrent to crime and costs substantially more than a sentence of life without parole. The costs of the death penalty alone should be ample reason enough for lawmakers to have second thoughts as to whether this is something any state should have in effect. The death penalty is a popular topic for many. Whether a person is for or against it, the facts should dictate what is better for each state and the country as a whole. If the lack of effectiveness is not enough to force the hand of lawmakers, then the high costs should suffice. In conclusion, the death penalty should be abolished in all 50 states in the United States, as death is not reversible but laws undoubtedly are.
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