

The Deterrence Myth

The Death Penalty And Public Safety

The death penalty does not deter heinous acts of irrational violence – and the American people know it. To the extent someone with a deadly weapon in a rage is going to be deterred from anything, the real prospect of being sentenced to life without parole is at least as persuasive as the remote chance of getting executed.

Executions keep murder rates... high?

- Regions with the most executions have the highest murder rates, and those with the fewest executions have the lowest murder rates.
- The murder rate in the South has remained consistently higher than the murder rate in the Northeast over the last five years. The South accounts for 82% of all executions since 1976; the Northeast accounts for less than 1%.
- A survey by *The New York Times* found that states without the death penalty have lower homicide rates than states with the death penalty. Further study by the Death Penalty Information Center shows that as executions rose through the late 1990's, states without the death penalty fared much better in reducing their murder rates. In 1990, death penalty states had only a 4% higher murder rate than non-death penalty states. However, that gap grew to 36% by the year 2000, and by 2005 states with the death penalty had a 46% higher murder rate than states without it.
- Death sentences are going down across the country, but the murder rate hasn't gone up. The number of people sentenced to death has dropped steadily every year for the past six years – while the FBI crime statistics show the U.S. murder rate remaining steady during the same period (through 2004). Chicago saw its lowest murder tally since 1965 just a year after the Illinois Governor commuted 167 death sentences to life without parole and with a five-year-old execution moratorium in place.
- In 2005, more than half of all law enforcement officers killed in the line of duty were killed in the South – home of the vast majority of executions. Less than 10% of law enforcement murders took place in the Northeast, where execution rates are lowest.

“Prosecutors must reveal the dirty little secret they too often share only among themselves: The death penalty actually hinders the fight against crime.”

– MANHATTAN DISTRICT ATTORNEY
ROBERT M. MORGENTHAU

- Law enforcement homicides have dropped dramatically over the last three decades and have remained steady the last few years despite a drop in death sentences and executions.

The death penalty diverts scarce resources from real crime prevention.

- The death penalty costs significantly more than a system where life without parole was the maximum penalty for murder. This has been proven in every state that has studied the cost of its death penalty, including New York, New Jersey, Indiana, Kansas, North Carolina, Texas, Florida, and California.
- A Dartmouth study found that death penalty trials are very costly relative to county budgets, and that the costs are borne primarily by increasing taxes and decreasing expenditures on police, highways, and other critical services.¹

People don't think capital punishment persuades killers.

- In May 2004 Gallup found a growing skepticism that the death penalty deters crime, with 62% of those polled saying that it is not a deterrent.
- Even police officers do not believe the death penalty is an effective deterrent. A 1995 Hart Research Associates poll of police chiefs in the U.S. found that police chiefs ranked the death penalty *last* among effective ways to reduce violent crime. A full 99% of respondents said that reducing drug abuse, improving the economy and reducing unemployment, simplifying court rules, increasing prison sentences, increasing the number of police officers, or reducing guns were more important than expanding the death penalty in reducing violent crime.²

¹ Katherine Baicker, "The Budgetary Repercussions of Capital Convictions," Dartmouth University, July 2001.

² Death Penalty Information Center, www.deathpenaltyinfo.org