

Should the death penalty be abolished?

Capital punishment is on the books in 37 states, and in the federal courts.

YES

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



Today, almost two thirds of the world's countries, including virtually all of Europe, have abolished the death penalty. It is 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 have once had.

Since 1976, at least 124 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, geography, and income level: Death sentences are more likely to be handed down when the murder victim is white. Some states use the death penalty; some don't. And people who can afford good lawyers generally don't receive death sentences.

Because death penalty trials are lengthy and the appeals process is complex, the system is not only costly, but it can take years before executions are carried out. Indeed, hundreds of the almost 3,400 people on death row in the U.S. have been there 20 years or longer—and many are not even close to execution.

Fortunately, there is a sound alternative to capital punishment: life in prison without parole. We can keep our communities safe and can join the international community by abandoning this medieval form of punishment. It is time to abolish the death penalty.

—**David Elliot** 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.

Over the past decade, the murder rate has dropped dramatically. Several recent academic studies show a clear deterrent effect from judicious use of the death penalty: For each actual execution, about 17 murders are prevented, the studies show.

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 that allows capital punishment, murderers found guilty get 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 someone is, in fact, the killer.

On the other hand, we can count in the hundreds the 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? The answer is that we need capital punishment for those rare cases in which the killer is beyond redemption.

—**Joshua Marquis** District Attorney, Clatsop County, Oregon