

Opinion: Police officials argue death penalty doesn't make us safer

By James Abbott, Antonio Cluny, Bob Denmark and Ronald Hampton

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Over the past decade, executions have dropped by more than 50 percent and the number of death sentences has steadily declined, according to the Death Penalty Information Center. As police and law enforcement officers with decades of experience in fighting crime in the United States and Europe, we believe that societies are better off without the death penalty. We recently came together in Washington, D.C., for the first international dialogue among law enforcement professionals about the death penalty and found important areas of agreement.

Europe has abandoned the death penalty, but European countries have lower murder rates and higher rates of solving homicides than the United States. In the United States, states with the death penalty generally have higher murder rates than states without it. For example, southern states have the highest murder rates and account for 82 percent of all U.S. executions. The deterrence argument is weak and it goes against our experience investigating serious crimes: the majority of offenders do not think through the consequences of their actions. In fact, they do not think they will ever be caught.

The death penalty, as it is applied, is too random to effectively deter potential offenders. If you execute a contract killer, for example, it would not deter a terrorist. If you execute a terrorist, it would not

deter a young man who breaks into a house, gets startled, and shoots the owner.

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sometimes argue that the death penalty is needed to deter the killing of police officers. But if one of us were murdered, we would not want the perpetrator to receive the death penalty. The most important thing would be taking care of our families and helping them heal. We have seen how painful it is for families to go through years of death penalty trials and appeals and that would be the last thing we would want for our own families. The idea that the death penalty provides "closure" for victims' families is a myth.

Another myth is that only the guilty are executed. We can tell stories about times experienced officers were certain they had the right guy, only to find out later they were wrong. Even when police do their jobs professionally and in good faith, mistakes will be made and innocent people will be convicted. It is hard to imagine a greater tragedy. At least with life without parole, there is a chance to reopen cases if new evidence becomes available. Death is irreversible.

Especially as budgets tighten in the United States and around the world, the death penalty may be a system governments can no longer afford. The death penalty costs far more than the alternatives. In California, for example, the death penalty costs \$125 million more -- every year -- than life without parole, which also takes the offender off the streets permanently. All of the money that states spend on the death penalty could be used to hire more police officers, train them better, solve cold cases, and prevent crimes from occurring in the first place. We should spend our limited resources on programs that work.

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Europe has the same violent offenses that the United States has, but has found ways to protect its citizens without capital punishment. For example, Portugal abolished the death penalty in 1864 and has never seriously considered reinstating it. Even when the country experienced political violence and organized terrorism during a revolution in 1974, the death penalty was not brought back. Had the terrorists been sentenced to death, they might have become martyrs and the violence might have continued.

Do some murderers deserve the death penalty? Maybe so, but that is an emotional reaction. It is not the basis for creating public policy or finding the best ways to keep citizens safe. More states should follow New Jersey's lead, and the example of 15 U.S. states, repeal the death penalty, and adopt life without parole in its place. As a growing number of Americans recognize, life without parole is a harsh punishment, protects the public, and eliminates the risk of an irreversible mistake, while freeing up funds for more effective crime-fighting programs. This is a better way to serve victims' families and prevent violence.

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