



Executions and Prison Safety

A distraction from real solutions

It sounds logical – once someone has a life sentence, they have nothing left to lose by killing in prison, right? Wrong. People serving life sentences must make prison their homes forever, so preserving even tiny privileges makes a big difference to their quality of life. That is why studies and the real-life experience of wardens and corrections officers have found that the death penalty fails to deter murder in prison.

Keeping Prisons Safe: Voices From the Front Lines

“ I’ve been in this system for over 40 years. I’ve been held hostage and been through multiple prison riots. **If someone told me that the death penalty would protect me as a corrections officer, I would be offended.** Safety inside prisons depends on proper staffing, programming, and effective reintegration of inmates back into society. The death penalty does not safeguard anybody.”

– *Calvin Lightfoot, former corrections officer, warden, and Secretary of Public Safety and Correctional Services for the state of Maryland*

“ A well-managed prison with proper classification and staffing can create incentives for lifers to behave while segregating and punishing those who are a threat before violence ever occurs. Our prison system already knows how to do this. **The reality is that the death penalty is not, and never has been, a deterrent. Prison safety depends on proper staffing, equipment, resources and training.** Certainly the money spent on trying to put someone to death for over 20 years could find better use in addressing those practical needs of our correctional system.”

– *John Connor, former chief special prosecutor for the state of Montana for 21 years, prosecuting five death penalty cases involving prison homicides*

“I don’t believe there is a single qualified prison warden in this country that wouldn’t trade the death penalty for more resources to keep his or her facility safe.”

– *Ron McAndrew, former warden, Florida State Prison, who presided over eight executions*

What incentive do life-sentenced inmates have to keep from killing again in prison?

- ♦ Life without parole can be “bad, horrible, or extremely horrible,” as one warden put it. For those few who are a danger to others, there are facilities for long-term custodial segregation – a tiny cell where even meals are eaten alone. The bleak and harsh reality of life in those conditions provides strong incentive to avoid that fate.
- ♦ People serving life must make prison their homes forever. They will never again have the thousands of freedoms many of us take for granted – an extra hour in the sun, decent food, the touch of another

human being. The miserable environment of prison means people with life sentences have to preserve even the tiniest privileges they can get.

- ♦ If people serving life sentences have “nothing left to lose” by killing in prison, the same would be true for death row – you can’t be executed twice. Yet thousands of death row inmates live in prison for years, even decades, without committing another murder in prison.
- ♦ The death penalty is no more of a deterrent for murder in prison than outside prison. If it were, one would expect *more* prison murders in non-death penalty states. Yet states without the death penalty have a lower homicide rate among prisoners than states with the death penalty.
- ♦ There is no evidence that the threat of the death penalty prevents inmates from harming corrections officers. Between 2005 and 2014, there were 24 corrections officers in the United States murdered by inmates. Every one of these murders occurred in a jurisdiction *with the death penalty*.

Even prisoners can be wrongly convicted

- ♦ The same problems that plague all death penalty cases are exacerbated by the fishbowl environment of prison. Prisoners may be more easily persuaded to give false testimony in exchange for better treatment, increasing the risk of wrongful convictions.

CASE IN POINT

Joe Amrine was serving a short sentence for check fraud in Missouri when he was convicted of a prison stabbing. His trial attorney conducted no investigation. The three inmates who testified against him said later that prison officials pressured them to finger Amrine. A prison guard consistently said he saw one of the three prison “witnesses” fleeing the crime scene. Amrine spent 17 years on death row before state courts concluded he was actually innocent.

The Use of Resources: Preventing Prison Murder

- ♦ The death penalty is shown to cost millions more than a system of life in prison. Those extra resources would be better spent *preventing* prison murders at a fraction of the cost.
- ♦ One California prison lowered fatal stabbings by 94% simply by removing the sheet metal shop from its prison industry. Other prisons have removed blind spots, increased security in high-risk areas, and placed dangerous inmates in special units to maximize staff protection.

How often do people serving life sentences kill in prison, anyway?

- ♦ Research shows that those serving life sentences are less likely than the average inmate to break prison rules. In one survey of correctional workers, 89% reported that lifers presented fewer disciplinary problems than the general population, and 92% said lifers were more cooperative.
- ♦ Prison murder is extremely rare. The murder of a corrections officer is even more rare. Many states haven’t had a single corrections officer killed in the last 30 years. Prison staff are *82 times less likely* to be murdered by an inmate than the average person outside.

Sources available at ejusa.org