

Blacks who kill whites are most likely to be executed

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Blacks convicted of killing whites are not only more likely than other killers to receive a death sentence – they are also more likely to actually be executed, a new study suggests.

But the findings showed that African Americans on death row for killing nonwhites are less likely to be executed than other condemned prisoners.

“Examining who survives on death row is important because less than 10 percent of those given the death sentence ever get executed,” said David Jacobs, co-author of the study and professor of sociology at Ohio State University.

“The disparity in execution rates based on the race of victims suggests our justice system places greater value on white lives, even after sentences are handed down.”

This apparently is the first study to examine whether the race of murder victims affects the probability that a convicted killer gets the ultimate punishment, Jacobs said.

He conducted the study with Zhenchao Qian, professor of sociology at Ohio State, Jason Carmichael of McGill University and Stephanie Kent of Cleveland State University. Their results appear in the August 2007 issue of the *American Sociological Review*.

The study examined outcomes of 1,560 people sentenced to death in 16

states from 1973 to 2002. These 16 states were chosen because they had the complete data that the researchers needed for the study.

Other research has shown that the great majority of those sentenced to death have their sentences overturned in appeal, Jacobs said. But little is known about the factors that lead some condemned prisoners to be executed.

There is more than a two-fold greater risk that an African American who killed a white person will be executed than there is for a white person who killed a non-white victim.

“The fact that blacks who kill non-whites actually are less likely to be executed than blacks who kill whites shows there is a strong racial bias here,” Jacobs said. “Blacks are most likely to pay the ultimate price when their victims are white.”

Hispanics who killed whites were also more likely to be executed than were whites who killed non-whites, the study showed. But the risk of execution were not as strong for Hispanics who killed whites as they were for blacks who killed whites.

The study also reinforced findings by Jacobs in previous studies. He found that the likelihood of a legal death penalty was greater in states with higher proportions of black residents, an ideologically more conservative population, and in states where there was greater support for Republican candidates.

In the most recent study, Jacobs finds that execution probabilities increase in states along with the population of African Americans, up to a point. But when the population of blacks reaches about 16 percent of the population, executions start to decrease. Probably at that point, African Americans have enough votes and political influence within a

state to reduce the number of executions, Jacobs said.

Various other political and state-level factors also played a role in the use of the death penalty in the states studied. States with more conservative citizens were more likely to execute, as were states that had higher percentages of voters who supported Republican presidential candidates.

“Republican presidential candidates often run on law and order platforms, so it is not surprising that the success of these candidates goes along with support for the harshest punishment,” he said.

“Overall, we found that our justice system is not colorblind, even after offenders are put on death row,” Jacobs said. “White lives are still valued more than black ones when it comes to deciding who gets executed and who does not.”

Source: Ohio State University

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