

# Family members of victims pose a growing challenge for capital punishment

August 18 2014

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An examination of the nation's history in carrying out executions is encountering a new challenge for modern-day capital punishment.

Bringing in [family members](#) of victims to [witness](#) executions brings about a new source of pressure on the execution, complicating actual execution arrangements and the position of [capital punishment](#) in the public imagination, according to Annulla Linders, a University of Cincinnati associate professor of sociology. Linders' research, titled, "Bearing Witness: Victim's Relatives and Challenges to the Execution Narrative," was presented at the 109th Meeting of the American Sociological Association in San Francisco.

Linders' research explores how family members of victims bearing witness to executions has transformed the process of the execution as well as its audience. "How can we account for this recent transformation of the execution and its audience and what are the consequences of this change for understanding executions specifically, and capital punishment more generally," writes Linders. "I argue that the opening up of the witness box to the murder victim's family has turned the execution into a somewhat different kind of event than it was – it has come to re-personalize executions and re-infuse them with interestedness and passion," states Linders. "No longer is it enough that the death is swift and the arrangements are efficient, the execution must now also satisfy the psychological demands of long-suffering relatives and other intimates of murder victims."

Thirty-two U.S. states still carry death penalty laws. Linders reports that prior to the 1990s, Louisiana was the only state by law to allow intimates of victims to witness executions. That number grew to five states by 1996.

Linders says currently 18 states allow the presence of victims' relatives to witness the execution.

As a result, not only has execution technology made executions a more sterile and efficient event, says Linders, but they now are expected to bring some sort of emotional satisfaction (relief, peace) or closure to the families.

The process of the execution erupted in national controversy following the so-called "botched" lethal injection execution of Clayton Lockett in Oklahoma last April. The event brought about a nationwide stay on executions until Georgia, Missouri and Florida carried out lethal injection executions within 24 hours of each other, beginning on June 17.

Linders' findings come from researching newspaper accounts of executions dating back to the 19th century. Her research in the Library of Congress newspaper archives traced accounts of executions ranging from 19th century public hangings to current execution chambers typically requiring 12 official witnesses to the event. The first laws calling for removal of public executions were adopted in the 1830s.

The paper details several national newspaper reports of families witnessing executions of the convicted murderer of a family member, as well as the reports describing family members' feelings following the execution. The paper begins with the execution of the so-called "Freeway Killer," convicted serial killer William Bonin, who in 1996 became the state of California's first person to die by lethal injection,

and the third to be executed in California after the U.S. Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty in 1977.

"Neither morbidly curious spectators (in the old sense of [public executions](#)) nor disinterested witnesses (in the new sense of closed executions), the family members of murder victims are in the witness box to view and judge something other than the execution of the law," writes Linders. "They are there as survivors, not so much to observe the [execution](#) – there are official witnesses to do that – as to bear witness to the pain and suffering experienced by murder [victims](#) and those they leave behind."

Provided by University of Cincinnati

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