

Study: Political, economic, social factors affect local decisions about death penalty

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Broad political, economic, and social factors influence disciplinary punishment. In particular, over the last half century, such considerations have shaped jurisdictions' use of the death penalty, which has declined considerably since the 1990s. A new study examined the factors associated with use of the death penalty at the county level to provide a fuller picture of what issues influence court outcomes. The study concludes that partisan politics, religious fundamentalism, and economic threat influenced local decisions about the death penalty. The study also found that the size of the African American population, which prior state-level studies have found to be associated with use of the death penalty, was not directly associated with the recent decline in the use of this punishment.

The study, by researchers at Missouri State University and American University, will appear in *Criminology*, a publication of the American Society of Criminology.

"It is essential to examine the local political environment and the composition of jurisdictional populations to capture the processes that influence local trial court outcomes," suggests Ethan Amidon, associate professor of criminology and criminal justice at Missouri State University, who led the study. "Although we found support for a number of perspectives that have been identified in prior state-level studies, our findings indicate that these relationships are more complex when considered at the local, decision-making level."

In the last 30 years, national reliance on the [death penalty](#) has declined across all states—from a late 20th century peak of 330 [death](#) sentences in 1994 to 32 death sentences in 2016. Most counties have also used the death penalty less.

In this study, researchers examined a variety of issues associated with the use of death sentences across three decennial periods from 1990 to 2010. They studied information from 2,572 counties or county equivalents, using information from the U.S. Census Bureau's decennial reports and its American Community Survey; they also considered information from a database that contains death sentences by county from 1991 to 2017. Prior research has studied this information primarily from a state perspective.

Among the factors examined were the percentages of people in each county who voted for the Republican presidential candidate, were religious fundamentalists (based on church membership data), were of different races and ethnicities, and were unemployed. The study measured each county's tradition of vigilantism by tallying the lynching rate in each jurisdiction.

To control for factors that could influence the use of the death penalty, the study considered several variables, including each county's number of homicides, rate of violent crime (homicides, robberies, rapes, and aggravated assaults), and rate of property crime (burglaries, larcenies, and car thefts). The study also considered [total population](#) and income inequality, as well as rates of divorce and poverty in each county.

The researchers concluded that several factors are associated with county-level reliance on the death penalty:

- The degree of public support for Republican presidential candidates was directly associated with greater reliance on the

death penalty over the study period. Given that the death penalty has declined over the last three decades, this means that the decrease in the use of this punishment was more gradual in jurisdictions with a growth in support for Republican presidential candidates, who tend to espouse law and order positions.

- Counties with larger Protestant fundamentalist populations imposed death sentences to a greater degree, on average, than counties with smaller such populations. This contributes to a degree of persistence in the death penalty in jurisdictions where citizens remain strongly committed to fundamentalist ideologies.
- The size of economically marginalized populations within counties was directly related to greater reliance on the death penalty. This relationship inverted once the size of the unemployed population reached a tipping point.
- Neither the size of a county's African American and Hispanic populations nor its history of vigilantism was directly related to its jurisdictional use of the death penalty. However, the size of the African American [population](#) was associated indirectly with reliance on the death [penalty](#) in terms of its influence on jurisdictional unemployment.

The authors note their study is missing data on factors such as the percentage of religious fundamentalists and crime rate variables, and a few of the measurement procedures used by some of their sources changed across the study period, including those that provided crime data.

"Even as reliance on capital punishment has waned in the early 21st century, the nature and severity of penal punishments have continued to be shaped by the broader social, political, and economic landscapes in which they are immersed," according to John Eassey, a researcher in residence in the Justices Programs Office at American University, who coauthored the study.

Provided by Crime and Justice Research Alliance

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