

# Indonesians' support for the death penalty declines with more rigorous survey methods

October 8 2021, by Carolyn Hoyle, Parvais Jabbar

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Indonesia, like its regional neighbors in Southeast Asia, has supported capital punishments for decades, particularly for drug-related offenses.

This firm stance has been justified by evidence from national polls [indicating](#) the public supports the death [penalty](#).

However, these polls were [not conducted using rigorous methodologies](#). This means the results cannot be relied upon.

[Our latest survey](#) uses a more thorough and rigorous methodology. It found the public has little faith in the harshest penal responses. Although the majority (69%) favored retention of the death penalty, only 35% felt "strongly" in favor of it.

The data indicate that respondents' support for the death penalty declines when they learn more about the scope and administration of the death penalty.

Thus, if a country's decision to retain the death penalty is based on a reference to democratic will, policymakers should draw only on rigorous and independent empirical research.

## **Fragile and malleable support**

We worked with [IPSOS](#), a leading international market research company, to conduct a public [opinion](#) survey. It involved a stratified random probability sample of 1,515 respondents in Aceh, Bali, Greater Jakarta, North Sumatra, South Sulawesi, West Java and Yogyakarta.

While support for capital punishment was high in general, we found it is based on an assumption that the death penalty is carried out fairly and proportionately. When people learn it is not, support diminishes.

When given the choice of alternative sentences, such as life in prison without parole, support for the death penalty fell to just 25%.

Further rigorous questioning suggests initial support reflects gut reactions to an emotive topic—a desire to see wrongdoers punished—rather than well-informed opinions.

Importantly, respondents lacked knowledge about the death penalty. Only 2% considered themselves very well informed. Only 4% said they were very concerned about the issue.

When reflecting on specific and realistic cases, their support decreased further.

For example, when given details about a man who shot dead a shop owner during a robbery, 40% of respondents thought he deserved the death penalty. But when told the man had no previous convictions, support for the death sentence decreased to only 9%.

Likewise, 50% thought a "kingpin" drug trafficker deserved the death penalty. For a similar case where the defendant was poor and uneducated, simply a drug mule, this dropped to just 14%.

More than half of those who supported capital punishment did so because they believed it deterred serious crime. Over a third would support abolition if religious leaders did.

But when questioned about preferred measures to reduce such crime in Indonesia, respondents showed little trust in capital punishment. They had more faith in effective policing, poverty reduction or therapeutic interventions, such as healthcare treatments for drug addiction.

Asked which measures would be most effective to reduce drug crime, only 9% of the public suggested increasing death sentences, with only 6% suggesting more executions.

## The need for better methods for opinion polls

[Indonesian opinion polls](#), though infrequent, indicate around 75% support for the death penalty. A poll by Indo Barometer in 2015 found 84% supported the death penalty for drug dealers.

Superficial surveys may give us an idea of shifting opinions over time. However, they cannot measure strength of opinion, knowledge about the topic, or how the public might feel about whether particular types of offenses or offenders should be subject to capital punishment.

Such polls also cannot elicit nuanced responses to particular features of cases involving, for example, strong aggravating or mitigating features.

[Comparative analysis of public opinion research](#) from eight countries demonstrates that reliable data on public opinion can only be produced by rigorous, methodologically sophisticated surveys. This includes surveys of the kind commissioned by The Death Penalty Project in [Malaysia](#), [Trinidad](#) and [Zimbabwe](#).

Rigorous and independent empirical research that teases out the nuances of public support is necessary if retention is to be justified by reference to democratic will.

### What's next?

This strong empirical research is particularly important for drug trafficking in Indonesia, given the [high levels of national and international concern](#) about the harms caused by drugs.

Our findings demonstrated that when people are presented with accurate information about the retention and use of the [death](#) penalty, high initial

support declines dramatically.

It seems the more informed the public are regarding the [death penalty](#) and its administration, the less they support it.

Support also reduces when people are presented with mitigating circumstances or when considering alternatives such as life in prison.

In light of this and the ongoing revisions to the Criminal Code, it is a good time to reflect on the criminal justice response to drug trafficking in Indonesia. This also has implications for neighboring jurisdictions in the "golden triangle" of Southeast Asia that are similarly affected.

Indonesia should develop evidence-based policy on [drug](#) and crime control efforts and it should do so without assuming the public demands capital punishment.

Public opinion often is highly sensitive to new information, especially when that information is tailored to specifically address the public debate. Public opinion should be carefully measured if it is to inform public policy.

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