

Death Penalty Does Not Deter Murder, According to New Study

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Eighty-eight percent of the country's top criminologists do not believe the death penalty acts as a deterrent to homicide, according to a new study published today in Northwestern University School of Law's *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* authored by Professor Michael Radelet, chair of the sociology department at the University of Colorado at Boulder, and Traci Lacock, an attorney and CU-Boulder graduate student in sociology.

The study titled "Do Executions Lower Homicide Rates? The Views of Leading Criminologists" undermines deterrence as a rationale for maintaining the punishment, said Radelet, one of the nation's leading experts on the death penalty.

"These data show that deterrence, which in many circles is the strongest justification for the death penalty, falls on its face when closely examined by those who are best qualified to study and evaluate it," Radelet said. "Any justifications for the death penalty that might remain pale in comparison to drawbacks such as high costs, arbitrariness, executing the innocent and diverting resources from more effective ways to reduce crime and assist victims."

The study was conducted by sending questionnaires to the most pre-eminent criminologists in the country, including fellows of the American Society of Criminology, winners of the American Society of Criminology's prestigious Southerland Award and recent presidents of the American Society of Criminology. The American Society of Criminology is the top professional organization of criminologists in the world.

The 77 respondents were not asked for their personal opinion about the wisdom of the death penalty, but instead to answer the questions only on the basis of their understandings of the empirical research available on the subject.

Eighty-seven percent of the expert criminologists also believed that abolition of the death penalty would not have any significant effect on murder rates, Radelet said. And 75 percent of the respondents agreed that "debates about the death penalty distract Congress and state legislatures from focusing on real solutions to crime problems."

"Our survey indicates that the vast majority of the world's top criminologists believe that the empirical research has revealed the deterrence hypothesis for a myth," Radelet and Lacock wrote. "The consensus among criminologists is that the death penalty does not add any significant deterrent effect above that of long-term imprisonment."

Source: University of Colorado

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