



The Death Penalty

The Iowa Justice Action Network has joined with a coalition of other groups to oppose the re-introduction of the death penalty in Iowa, which we believe is a step backward in terms of the fair and effective functioning of our criminal justice system.

First, decades of research have shown that the death penalty is NOT an effective deterrent to murder. People who commit murder usually do so in the (often mistaken) belief that they won't get caught. Therefore, the difference between life behind bars and the death penalty does not enter into their thinking about whether or not to commit the crime. Thus, it is not surprising that U.S. Department of Justice data show that states with the death penalty actually have higher murder rates than states without it, and that there was no spike in murders in those states that recently abolished it.

Second, while most people who get the sentence are probably guilty, the rate of error is unacceptably high, as indicated by over 160 exonerations in the last 20 years or so. Who knows how many innocent people were put to death before modern exoneration efforts were initiated? Low income people, particularly those of color, are often railroaded through the system without adequate legal representation. The death penalty allows the criminal justice system to bury its mistakes. To those who think such biases couldn't occur in Iowa, we invite them to look at the strong racial and class biases that already exist in our system.

Third, the death penalty is incredibly expensive. Estimates by the American Bar Association show that states save millions of dollars in legal and incarceration costs by not having the death penalty in place. Part of the high cost is due to the lengthy appeals process for those on death row, but given the high error rate with such appeals in place, one can only imagine what it might be without them.

Finally, since the death penalty is not a deterrent, the only argument left in its favor is retribution. Do those conservatives that believe in limited government really want to give government the power of life and death, not for the purpose of enhancing public safety but simply for revenge? To those who say, "but what about the victims?" it should be pointed out that victims' families have been leaders of anti-death penalty movements in many states.

In sum, if the death penalty is ineffective, expensive, and inherently unfair in its application. IJAN urges that this legislation be soundly rejected by the Iowa General Assembly.