

This week's issue:

IS THE
DEATH
PENALTY
JUSTIFIED?

Should people who commit serious crimes be sentenced to death? The death penalty is also known as capital punishment. It is allowed in some states but **prohibited** in others. In 2014, a total of 35 people were put to death in the United States. Since 1977, over 1,400 people have been executed.

Advocates of the death penalty say that the threat of being punished by death stops people from committing violent crimes. They also contend that the death penalty helps murder victims' families find peace. Additionally, they argue that it is only right that people who commit violent crimes like torture or murder should not be allowed to live.

Those who take the **contrary** position argue that it is wrong to kill anyone, including a convicted criminal. They say the evidence shows that the death penalty does not lower rates of violent crime. Death penalty opponents also point out that in some cases innocent people have been convicted. After further investigation, their sentences were **reversed**. For example, DNA testing has shown that some people did not commit the crimes they were accused of, and they were **released** from prison.

One inmate, Anthony Ray Hinton, spent 30 years on death row before his murder conviction was overturned. He was released from prison in April 2015. Because many death sentences like Hinton's have been overturned, opponents of capital punishment are concerned that innocent people are being sentenced to death.

Supporters of capital punishment agree that these cases are tragic, especially when someone is proven innocent after they have already been put to death. They argue that the best way to address the problem is to improve the system that decides if someone is innocent or guilty in the first place. They say this will help make sure that only people who are truly guilty of serious crimes receive the death penalty.

What is your opinion? Should the death penalty be prohibited, or are there good reasons to keep it? When, if ever, do you think capital punishment is justified?

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advocate | contrary | prohibit | release | reverse

USE THE FOCUS WORDS *and alternate parts of speech

advocate (*noun*) supporter

➡ **Sample Sentence:** **Advocates** of the death penalty say that the threat of being punished by death stops people from committing violent crimes.

🗣️ **Turn and Talk:** Who is your best **advocate** when you are faced with a conflict?

***advocate** (*verb*) to recommend or argue in favor of

➡ **Sample Sentence:** Cheyenne **advocates** drinking water instead of soda.

🗣️ **Turn and Talk:** If you had to choose one option, would you **advocate** for a longer school year or longer school day? Explain.

contrary (*adjective*) opposite; opposing

➡ **Sample Sentence:** Those who take the **contrary** position argue that the death penalty does not lower rates of violent crime.

🗣️ **Turn and Talk:** How do you convince your parents to agree with you when their position is **contrary** to yours?

prohibit (*verb*) to not allow; to forbid

➡ **Sample Sentence:** Swimming at the beach is often **prohibited** when there is no lifeguard on duty.

🗣️ **Turn and Talk:** What is **prohibited** at your school that you feel shouldn't be?

release (*verb*) to let go; to set free

➡ **Sample Sentence:** Anthony Ray Hinton was **released** from prison after spending 30 years on death row.

🗣️ **Turn and Talk:** What is the first thing you do when you are **released** from school for summer vacation?

***release** (*noun*) the act of allowing someone or something to go free

➡ **Sample Sentence:** The zoo reported an accidental **release** of two lions.

🗣️ **Turn and Talk:** What should the justice system do to help wrongfully convicted inmates upon their **release**?

reverse (*verb*) to change back; to overturn

➡ **Sample Sentence:** After further investigation, the convicted felon's guilty verdict was **reversed**, and he was released from prison.

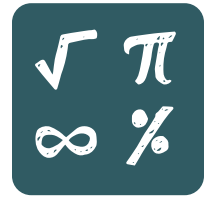
🗣️ **Turn and Talk:** What might make you **reverse** your decision to try out for a play or sports team?

***reverse** (*noun*) the opposite

➡ **Sample Sentence:** Many people assume that the Nile River runs north to south, but the **reverse** is true.

🗣️ **Turn and Talk:** Should girls be able to play on boys' soccer teams? What about the **reverse**?

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DO THE MATH

People who **advocate** the death penalty say it helps society by discouraging crime and eliminating the most dangerous criminals. On the **contrary**, some say a society that executes its own citizens will be less moral and less fair overall. Many countries around the world, from Mexico to South Africa, have abolished the death penalty. The European Union (EU) **prohibits** the death penalty in all EU countries.

Option 1: Between 1973 and 2013, American courts sentenced 8,466 people to death. Of these people, only 1,359 were executed. What percentage of the people sentenced to death were actually executed?

- A. about 6.2%
- B. about 8.5%
- C. about 10.3%
- D. about 16.1%

Option 2: In 2000, a study found that 68% of death sentences between 1973 and 1995 were **reversed** because of serious errors. In 9% of those reversals, the defendant was eventually acquitted (freed from criminal charge) and **released**. What percentage of people sentenced to death were eventually acquitted?

 **Discussion Question:** The study mentioned above found that in 68% of the cases where a defendant was sentenced to death, the sentence was **reversed** by another court because serious mistakes had been made during the trial. Death penalty opponents say this shows that the system is deeply flawed. When mistakes are so common, they say, the only way to prevent innocent people from being executed is to **prohibit** capital punishment, or the death penalty. On the **contrary**, some death penalty **advocates** say these statistics prove that each defendant gets a fair trial with safeguards to catch mistakes. They point out that only 9% of those reversals resulted in the defendant being acquitted. In most reversals, the defendant is not acquitted and **released**, but rather is still found guilty and sentenced to prison instead of death. What do you think? Do these statistics on death sentence reversals support the position of death penalty **advocates** or of their opponents?

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THINK SCIENTIFICALLY

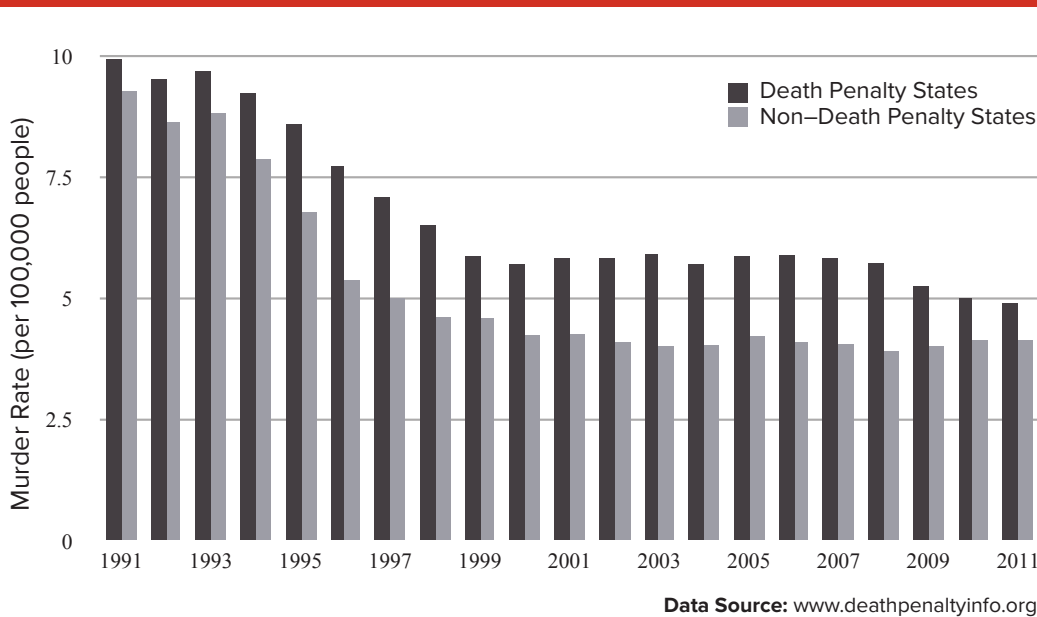
Mr. Seemy was discussing the death penalty with his students.

“If a state allows the death penalty, people in that state must be more scared to commit crimes than people in states that do not have the death penalty,” says James, **advocating** the death penalty.

“No way!” Miranda replied. “Just because the punishment is worse doesn’t mean there’s going to be less crime. When someone is going to commit a crime that bad, they aren’t thinking about the punishment.”

“On the **contrary**, there are studies that show that criminals do think about the punishment, and harsher punishment gives them more adrenaline when they commit a crime,” Mr. Seemy stated. “As of June 2013, twenty states **prohibit** the death penalty. Let’s look to see if the crime rate in states that do allow the death penalty is lower than the crime rate in states that do not allow the death penalty.”

Mr. Seemy found some interesting statistics online about the murder rates in death penalty versus non-death penalty states from 1991–2011.



What patterns do you notice within these data? Do states **prohibiting** the death penalty have a higher or lower murder rate?

Do these data support Miranda’s or James’ assumptions? Explain.

It is tempting to conclude that the difference you see in this graph between death penalty and non-death penalty states represents a causal effect. Why is that a dangerous conclusion? What additional data would you seek to determine whether there is a cause-and-effect relationship?

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DEBATE THE ISSUE

Pick one of these positions (or create your own).

A

The death penalty is justified.

OR

B

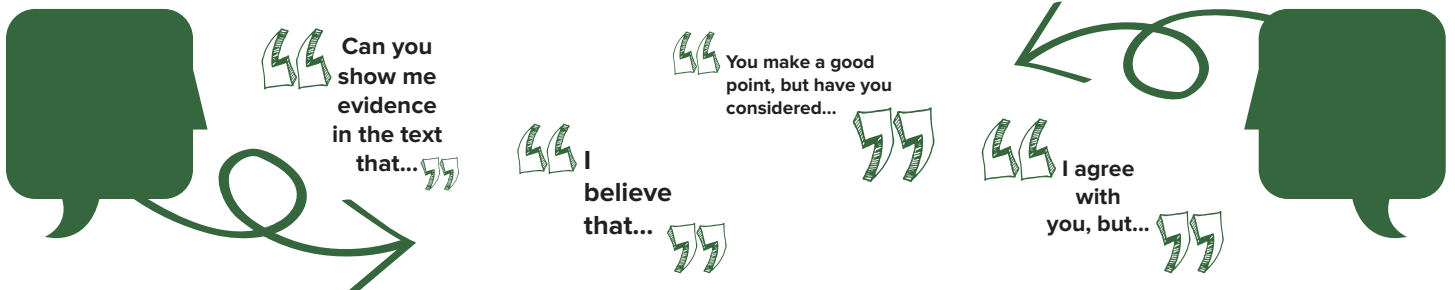
The death penalty is not justified.

OR

CREATE YOUR OWN

Jot down a few notes on how to support your position during a discussion or debate.

Be a strong participant by using phrases like these:



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TAKE A STAND



Support your position with clear reasons and specific examples. Try to use relevant words from the Word Generation list in your response.

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