

Capital Punishment - Log Cabin Democrat (Conway, AR) - January 6, 2016 - page 1

January 6, 2016 | Log Cabin Democrat (Conway, AR)

Currently, Arkansas has 34 inmates on death row. On the surface, the death penalty, which brought these prisoners to death row, seems like a good policy for two reasons. First, many people believe that executing criminals may actually save lives. The fear of being put to death may keep potential criminals from committing murders, saving the lives of their would-be victims. The second belief is that Arkansas can save money by executing these prisoners rather than paying to keep them in prison for the rest of their lives. Playing the role of a contrarian, Professor John Donohue from Stanford University points to convincing evidence, suggesting that these reasons given to support the death penalty do not hold up under scrutiny.

The first piece of evidence comes from Steve Levitt and shows that many murderers live in environments that are significantly more dangerous than death row. For instance, a crack dealer in one gang runs the risk of getting shot by a member of another gang, as the gangs use violence to compete for retail space with other gangs. Levitt explains that such a gang member is three times more likely to get shot in his everyday life than he is to be executed once he is on death row. Think about this. Death row is safer than the streets for these criminals. Therefore, the fear of the death penalty will not do much to deter crime if a criminal is safer on death row than he is on the streets. To highlight this point, let me mention that the last execution in Arkansas was ten years ago in November of 2005. For the last ten years, death row has been safer than the streets for criminals in Arkansas.

While I have not seen research on the Arkansas experience, research from other states may provide a useful approximation for what we can expect in Arkansas. Along these lines, Donohue points to research by two Duke University professors who found that North Carolina spent, on average, \$2.16 million for each execution. These costs were incurred by lengthy and expensive death penalty trials and appeals. It would have been cheaper to simply keep the prisoners in jail.

Because it is so easy to construct convincing arguments that support the death penalty, as I did at the beginning of this column, the death penalty provides a good example of why scholarly research is important. The arguments in favor of the death penalty were not supported by the data. Specifically, the death penalty does not provide a significant threat to criminals who engage in very dangerous activity and it does not save the state money.

At a time when the state government does not seem to have enough money to fund various programs that many people favor, it may be time to rethink whether we should have the death penalty in Arkansas. The death penalty is an expensive program that does not seem to deter criminals from committing violent crimes, so perhaps we can find other, more productive, ways to spend tax payer dollars.

Joe McGarrity is a professor of economics at the University of Central Arkansas. Contact him by email at joem@uca.edu.

Copyright, 2016, Log Cabin Democrat, All Rights Reserved.