

# The Seattle Times

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## Editorials

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### Editorial: It's time for the state to end the death penalty

The Times editorial board previously supported the death penalty. In recent years, it has considered changing that position, and Inslee's announcement renewed that reassessment. Washington should become the 19th state to abolish capital punishment.

Seattle Times Editorial



CAPITAL punishment fails the sober metrics of good public policy. Rarely used, it does not make citizens safer. It is applied inequitably, even randomly. It is much more expensive than alternatives. And it exposes the state to the risk, however small, of making a heinous mistake.

Some family members of the victims of death-row inmates make impassioned arguments for the death penalty. Theirs are heartbreaking stories. The state owes them not vengeance, but swift and sure justice. The death penalty is neither.

Gov. Jay Inslee announced last week he would not sign any death warrants that came to his desk, citing many of these reasons. But his moratorium lasts only as long as he is in office. His successor could resume signing death warrants. The governor and Legislature should change the law.

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Washington should become the 19th state to abolish capital punishment.

#### Unequally applied across the state

The death penalty, if rationally applied, would be reserved for the worst of the worst.

In practice, its use "defies rational explanation," state Supreme Court Justice Charles Johnson wrote in dissent of a 2006 death-penalty case. "The death penalty is like lightning, randomly striking some defendants and not others."

It did not apply to mass murderers such as the notorious Green River killer Gary Ridgway, Wae Mee Massacre killers Benjamin Ng or Kwan Fai Mak. Since 1981, it has not been applied in 29 of the state's 39 counties, partly due to politics and cost to the counties.

A 2006 Washington State Bar Association report noted that prosecutors in Pierce and Spokane counties sought death sentences in about half of the eligible cases, while King and Snohomish counties sought it in only about a quarter of such cases. Pierce County, with 11 percent of the state's population, handed down 27 percent of the state's death sentences.

Equitable use of the state's most powerful punishment must not depend on the location of the crime. It clearly does.

### **Double the public cost**

A death sentence costs at least twice as much, start to finish, than a sentence of life without parole, according to a Maryland study. The Bar Association study pegged the cost here of prosecution, defense and appeals at nearly \$800,000 more for a death penalty. Most of that cost is borne by counties. In King County, taxpayers have spent about \$10 million on two pending death-penalty cases — and neither have even gone to trial. Smaller counties have been threatened with bankruptcy by the cost of death-penalty cases.

The cost of lifetime imprisonment pales in comparison, and ensures the same level of public safety. The Legislature's fiscal staff estimated that abolishing the death penalty required adding just two prison beds.

### **The risk of a mistake**

Criminal justice is a human endeavor, prone to human mistakes. Among the 33 men sentenced to death in Washington since 1981, 19 were taken off death row after appeals, including defendants given a reprieve because of serious mental illnesses. One was underage at the time of his crime.

Nationwide, 140 people have been released from death row due to evidence of wrongful conviction since the death penalty was reinstated, while 1,360 were executed. There is credible evidence several were wrongfully executed.

The absolute finality of death requires absolute certainty. That cannot be ensured.

### **Justice, not vengeance**

Victims' families are often powerful advocates for capital punishment. The nine men on Washington's death row each committed an abomination.

But taking a life for a life is vigilante justice. Victims' families are due rational punishment for perpetrators, not vengeance. Death penalty appeals add at least a decade to the final resolution.

The death penalty is fundamentally flawed, overly expensive and morally wrong. It is time for it to end in Washington.

*Editorial board members are editorial page editor Kate Riley, Frank A. Blethen, Ryan Blethen, Sharon Pian Chan, Lance Dickie, Jonathan Martin, Thanh Tan, William K. Blethen (emeritus) and Robert C. Blethen (emeritus).*