

# Reasons for Supporting and Opposing Capital Punishment in the USA: A Preliminary Study

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## Abstract

*The death penalty is a controversial subject in our society. Research has explored why people support or oppose capital punishment. Most the literature to date looks at the reasons provided one at a time. In this study, a multivariate analysis was conducted to see which reasons best explain the observed variation of support and opposition for capital punishment. It was found that emotional retribution, emotional opposition, morality, and law and order, were the only reasons which had statistically significant effects on the degree of death penalty support among college students at a Midwestern university. Other variables, such as fear of crime, religious measures, other punishment ideologies, and personal characteristics (which earlier studies found statistically significant using bivariate analysis) were not statistically significant in this study. The results suggest the need for greater attention to and more study of death penalty attitudes using multivariate analysis.*

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Captain James Kendall, convicted in 1608 in Jamestown, Virginia, of spying for Spain, holds the dubious distinction of being the first person known to be executed in the United States (The Death Penalty Information Center, 2001). During the next 400 years, more than 19,000 people have also been executed (Durham, Elrod, and Kinkade, 1996). Despite the number of executions, support for capital punishment in the U.S. is far from universal. By the late 1700s, an abolitionist movement had gained momentum in this country (The Death Penalty Information Center, 2001). While abolitionists tried with some success to end capital punishment, there was general support for it among the population. By the middle 1960s, however, the death penalty had become highly controversial and less than 50% of U.S. citizens supported capital punishment (Bohm, 1991). It was also at this time that there was increasing pressure on the U.S. Supreme Court to decide the legality of the ultimate sanction. In 1972, in *Furman v. Georgia*, the U.S. Supreme Court declared capital punishment, as it was administered, unconstitutional. This suspension of the death penalty, however, only lasted for four years. During this four year period, support for capital punishment increased across the U.S. In 1976, in *Gregg v. Georgia*, the U.S. Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty. Today, 38 states and the federal government have capital punishment as a possible punishment (The Death Penalty Information Center, 2001).

Even today, the death penalty is a controversial subject. It brings forth adamant debate on if and why our society should have capital punishment. There has been extensive polling during the past 60 years to determine the degree of support for the death penalty (Bohm, 1987; Bohm, Clark, and Aveni, 1990; Durham et al., 1996). Current polls show that support for the death penalty has

dropped from 79% in 1989 to 65% in 2001 (The Death Penalty Information Center, 2001). While the degree of support for or opposition to the death penalty is important, it fails to explain the differing death penalty views found across the population. Understanding why people support or oppose capital punishment is important for abolitionists, proponents, politicians, and social scientists. As Whitehead, Blankenship, and Wright (1999) point out, "Given the literal life and death nature of capital punishment, it is important to continue research on this topic" (p. 250). Because the death penalty is the ultimate punishment in our society, there is clearly a need for more research on why people differ in their views on capital punishment. In this paper, the reasons for why people differ in their degree of support for or opposition to the death penalty are examined.

### **Literature Review**

There is a growing body of research that examines why some people highly favor the death penalty, others somewhat favor the death penalty, and still others oppose it to varying degrees. Early research focused upon personal characteristics, which have been found to be associated with differing levels of support for capital punishment. It has been found that White people generally have higher support for the death penalty than do Black people (Arthur, 1998; Bohm, 1991; Combs and Comer, 1982; Ellsworth and Gross, 1994; Harris, 1986). The research also suggests that the higher level of support for the death penalty by White people may be the result of prejudices against Black people (Aguirre and Baker, 1993; Arthur, 1998; Barkan and Cohn, 1994; Borg, 1997). Gender has been found to be correlated with death penalty views, with males more likely to support than females (Bohm, 1987; Borg, 1997; Ellsworth and Gross, 1994; Vidmar and Ellsworth, 1974; Whitehead and Blankenship, 2000). Research in the 1970s found that older Americans were more

likely to support the death penalty than were younger Americans (Bohm, 1987). Today, age is sometimes positively linked to support for the death penalty (Borg, 1997), but not always (Bohm, 1987). In some studies, education is negatively linked to the level of support the death penalty, and in others, there is no association between the two (Bohm, 1987; Borg, 1997). In a study of students at four Texas universities, Farnworth, Longmire, and West (1998) found that when looking at all majors, there was less support for capital punishment among seniors as compared to freshman. They attribute the difference to the “liberalizing” effect of higher education.

While not necessarily personal characteristics, political affiliation and religion have been found to be linked with views on capital punishment. Political affiliation many times predicts the degree of support for the death penalty, with Republicans generally having higher support than Democrats (Bohm, 1991; Grasmick and McGill, 1994; Harris, 1986; Tyler and Weber, 1982; Vidmar and Ellsworth, 1974). Religious salience (i.e., the importance of religion in a person’s life) is associated with lower support for capital punishment (Britt, 1998; Grasmick, Davenport, Chamlin, and Bursik, 1992). Frequency of religious activities (e.g., church attendance) has also been found to be inversely related to support for the death penalty (Grasmick, Cochran, Bursik, and Kimpel, 1993; Grasmick and McGill, 1994). Additionally, there is a difference in support for capital punishment among different religious groups (Britt, 1998; Grasmick et al., 1993), because some religions prohibit capital punishment, while others endorse it. Attitudinal death penalty literature gives undue focus to personal characteristics. While personal characteristics are associated with varying levels of support, they explain little of the underlying reasons for the difference.

Ideologies on punishment have frequently been provided as reasons for differing views of the death penalty. There are four general punishment ideologies: rehabilitation, retribution, deterrence, and incapacitation. According to Bohm (1987), the three general reasons given for supporting capital punishment are retribution, deterrence, and incapacitation.

The goal of rehabilitation is to return the offender as a productive member of society.

Rehabilitation, sometimes called treatment in the literature, is inconsistent with support for the death penalty in Western societies, where, according to mainstream religious beliefs, it is illogical to argue executing people treats them for the underlying causes for their criminal behavior. So whilst, rehabilitation is a valid reason to oppose capital punishment, the other three punishment ideologies clearly provide reasons for supporting the death penalty.

### **Deterrence**

Deterrence is the belief that society can stop crime by making punishment more severe than the benefits gained from criminal acts. There are two types of deterrence, specific and general. Specific deterrence is aimed at individual offenders. By making the punishment so harsh, a particular offender should not recidivate in the future. General deterrence is aimed at the general public. By making “an example” of an offender, it is argued that others will learn their lesson and not commit a similar crime. Proponents of the death penalty for deterrence reasons argue that a death sentence is a far more effective deterrent than life imprisonment (Ellsworth and Gross, 1994). According to the literature, deterrence is a common reason providing for

supporting the death penalty (Ellsworth and Gross, 1994; Thomas, 1977; Zeisel and Gallup, 1989). Many people, particularly politicians, indicate that the death penalty is an effective deterrent for the crime of murder (Ellsworth and Ross, 1983; Fagan, 1986; Vidmar and Ellsworth, 1974; Whitehead and Blankenship, 2000; Zeisel and Gallup, 1989). When forced to choose between supporting the death penalty for deterrence or retribution reasons, Tyler and Weber (1982) found that 63% of the respondents surveyed selected deterrence.

Rather than deter people from committing crimes, abolitionists argue that capital punishment actually causes more violence. Increased violence due to capital punishment is referred to in the literature as the brutalization effect (Amsterdam, 1982; Bowers, 1984; Bowers and Pierce, 1980). The brutalization effect as a reason to oppose the death penalty is diametrically opposite to the deterrence reason to support the death penalty. The deterrence position argues that capital punishment reduces violence while the brutalization position argues that it actually causes more violence in society.

### **Retribution**

Today, many people believe that retribution is an appropriate response to violent crimes (Bohm et al., 1990; Firment and Giselman, 1997; Lotz and Regoli, 1980). There has been a hardening of the public's attitude toward crime during the past twenty years and an increase in social acceptance of retribution for criminal acts (Bowers, 1984; Durham et al., 1996). While retribution, sometimes referred to as "just deserts" in the literature, is a complex punishment ideology (Bohm, 1992; Finckenauer, 1988), it states in essence that there must be punishment for

wrong doers and that the punishment must be proportionate to the harm caused by the criminal act. This ideology is founded on in the principle of *lex talionis*, which holds that the punishment must fit the crime. For example, in the Christian Bible, in Leviticus 24: 17-20, “And he that killeth any man shall surely be put to death. And he that killeth a beast shall make it good; beast for beast. And if a man causes a blemish in his neighbor; as he hath done, so shall it be done to him; breach for breach, eye for eye, tooth for tooth ... .” Therefore, support for the death penalty under this ideology is based upon ancient punitive reasons (Bohm, 1987). It is the idea that if a person takes a life, then he or she must sacrifice his or her own life. Thus, under this ideology murder is generally the only crime that should be punished by the death penalty.

Retribution is probably the most emotional of the punishment ideologies and support for the death penalty is frequently based upon emotions (Ellsworth and Gross, 1994; Ellsworth and Ross, 1983; Tyler and Weber, 1982). For many people, the ideology of retribution is based upon the idea of revenge by the victim’s family and society in general, that sentencing someone to death relieves the anger and hurt brought forth by the act of violence. According to the research, retribution, including emotional retribution, is a frequent reason provided by those who support capital punishment (Ellsworth and Gross, 1994; Firment and Geiselman, 1997; Whitehead and Blankenship, 2000; Zeisel and Gallup, 1989). In a study by Ellsworth and Gross (1983), it was observed that 79% of capital punishment proponents indicated that they are outraged when a murderer does not receive the death penalty.

### **Incapacitation**

Incapacitation is another reason given by some to justify support for the death penalty (Ellsworth and Gross, 1994; Fagan, 1986; Firment and Geiselman, 1997; Zeisel and Gallup, 1989). Under the incapacitation ideology, offenders are kept under tight state control so as to minimize their ability to commit future criminal acts. Curtailment can be done in many ways, such as house arrest, intensive supervision probation, imprisonment, and death. A person who has been executed cannot victimize other inmates or escape and harm innocent citizens and, therefore, poses no future danger to those in prison or general society. Beyond doubt, executing a person is the ultimate form of incapacitation.

Additionally, there is a belief by many that life imprisonment, even without a chance of parole, does not actually mean life (Ellsworth and Gross, 1994). Some people believe someday that the vicious murderer sentenced to life will be released again to prey upon innocent citizens.

Proponents of the death penalty under the incapacitation ideology argue that executing dangerous, violent offenders allows for society to ensure that they will not harm others in the future.

### **The instrumental perspective**

Besides the three punishment ideologies, there are other reasons that people have provided for supporting capital punishment. Citizens who fear crime tend to be more in favor of the death penalty (Arthur, 1998; Bohm, 1987; Thomas and Howard, 1977) but not always (Ellsworth and Gross, 1994; Seltzer and McCormick, 1987; Stinchcombe, Adams, Heimer, Scheppele, Smith, and Taylor, 1980). In addition, some proponents of the death penalty perceive crime rates as rising and see crime as a serious social problem that requires the death penalty in order to

maintain law and order. The “get tough with crime mentality,” with the death penalty representing the harshest and toughest punishment available to society (Bohm, 1989; Finckenaue, 1988) has resulted from a general frustration in the U.S. population with the inability to effectively deal with crime (Rankin, 1979). This frustration has led to a “knee-jerk” increase in support for the death penalty. Rankin (1979) argues that “support for the death penalty is associated with a willingness to use violence and punishment for social control” (p. 202). According to the literature, the above reasons for supporting the death penalty are part of the instrumental perspective (Arthur, 1998; Maxwell and Rivera-Vazquez, 1998; Tyler and Weber, 1982).

According to the instrumental perspective, “citizens who fear crime and regard crime as a major social problem are more likely to demand that punishment of crime should be more severe” (Arthur, 1998, p. 163). Maxwell and Rivera-Vazquez (1998) wrote that “the instrumentalist perspective holds that peoples’ attitudes toward the death penalty are driven primarily by their desires to reduce crime and protect society, and that the death penalty is a means to achieve this end” (p. 337).

It should be noted that the instrumental perspective is indirectly tied to the idea of deterrence. By using punitive, harsh sentences, like the death penalty, there is a desire to bring law and order by instilling fear into potential criminals. Maxwell and Rivera-Vazquez (1998) found that the instrumental perspective was important in predicting support for death penalty among 103 Puerto Rican undergraduate students. In a study of death penalty attitudes among Black people (Arthur,

1998), it was found that a perception that the courts are not harsh enough on criminals results in greater support for capital punishment.

The final reason provided for supporting the death penalty is costs (Bohm, 1987; Ellsworth and Gross, 1994; Zeisel and Gallup, 1989). Many people feel that it is cheaper to execute a person than to imprison that person for his or her natural life. While this viewpoint is erroneous, it is still a reason why some people support capital punishment. According to Bohm (1987), the issue of cost is also related to incapacitation. Arguably, it also has powerful instrumental undertones.

### **Opposition to capital punishment**

There are also several reasons commonly provided by those opposing capital punishment. A frequent reason provided is morality. Abolitionists feel that the death penalty is immoral and uncivilized (Firmant and Geiselman, 1997). Basically, the idea is that it is wrong to respond to violence with violence (Ellsworth and Gross, 1994). Linked with the morality position is the idea that the death penalty is cruel. Administrative concerns are also used as a reason to oppose capital punishment. The greatest administrative concern is the risk of executing an innocent person. There is growing evidence that many innocent persons have been sentenced to death (Radelet, Bedau, and Putman, 1992; Radelet, Lofquist, and Bedau, 1996), and abolitionists use the risk of executing innocent persons to explain their opposition to capital punishment (Ellsworth and Gross, 1994).

As with support for the death penalty, opposition to it can also be based on emotion.

Abolitionists are many times emotionally moved and saddened by executions. A final fundamental reason provided for opposing the death penalty that it is unfairly applied (Ellsworth and Gross, 1994). Abolitionists argue that the death penalty is disproportionately applied to minorities and the poor.

### **Research Question**

While literature on the death penalty has explored reasons for support and opposition surrounding capital punishment, it has not adequately explored which reasons account for the differences in the degree of support or opposition to the death penalty and their relative importance. In this study, measures for each of the primary reasons for supporting or opposing the death penalty are entered into a multivariate analysis with support for the death penalty as the dependent variable in order to determine which reasons are the best predictors of a person's views on capital punishment.

### **Methods**

Sample - The data for this study came from a survey of college students at a public four-year university in Michigan with an enrollment slightly under 10,000. A convenience sampling design was used to select the students in the study (Hagan, 1997). A convenience sample is when the researcher selects subjects who are available and willing to be part of the sample. Over 24 college courses offered during the 1999 Fall and 2000 Winter semesters were selected for administration of the survey. No instructors denied the request to survey the students in their classes. On average, there were 30 students in each selected class. Almost all of the selected

courses were Criminal Justice, general education social science, and general education English courses. Approximately 45% of those surveyed were criminal justice majors and 55% were from other disciplines. Because all majors at the university are required to take social science and English courses as part of their general education requirements, the selected courses represented a wide array of majors.

The nature of the survey was explained to the students, and it was emphasized that the survey was voluntary. Almost no students declined to participate in the survey; a total of 38 students declined to participate. Students completed the survey during class time. A total of 747 surveys were completed and returned. Because, 17 surveys were missing responses for the variable measuring death penalty support, they were dropped from the analysis. Therefore, the total number of respondents in this study is 730. Including the 17 incomplete surveys with the 38 refusals, the total response rate was 93%.

Measures - Dependent Variable. The students were asked their degree of support for capital punishment. Specifically, they were asked to “check one of the below statements that best reflects your attitude towards the death penalty: 1 = I am very strongly opposed to the death penalty; 2 = I am strongly opposed to the death penalty; 3 = I am somewhat opposed to the death penalty 4 = I am uncertain about the death penalty; 5 = I am somewhat in favor of the death penalty 6 = I am strongly in favor of the death penalty; 7 = I am very strongly in favor of the death penalty. Some death penalty attitudinal research has collapsed the measure of support for capital punishment into a dichotomous variable representing support or opposition (Ellsworth

and Gross 1994; Zeisel and Gallup, 1989). We feel this fails to capture the subtle but important differences in support and opposition for the death penalty found in society. There is a difference between supporting somewhat and very strongly supporting capital punishment. In addition, other studies have used a five point measure of death penalty support. It is felt that the seven point measurement used in this study would allow for a greater variance in views towards the death penalty, and it is explaining the difference in this variance which is the focus of this study.

Independent Variables. Variables measuring attitudes towards punishment and crime, religion, fear of crime, and personal characteristics are used in this study.

The questions were answered with a 5-point Likert-type response scale (1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree). A total of 15 of these questions were selected for analysis. The questions are as follows:

1. *Crime is one of the most serious social problems facing society today.* This question measures the issue of crime as a social problem as a reason for supporting the death penalty.
2. *It costs more money to incarcerate someone for life without parole for the crime of murder than it does to execute that person.* This question measures the reason to support capital punishment based upon the idea of cost.
3. *I feel that the death penalty should be used for the crime of murder and no other crime, such as rape.* This question measures the reason to support the death penalty based upon the idea of retribution in which the punishment is equal to the harm caused.

4. *The death penalty is a more effective deterrent than life imprisonment.* This question measures the deterrence rationale for support of the death penalty.
5. *Executions set a violent example that leads to further violence in society.* This question measures the reason provided for opposition to the death penalty based upon the idea of the brutalization effect.
6. *There is almost no danger of sentencing an innocent person to death* (reverse coded). This question measures the administrative reason of the chances of sentencing an innocent person to death that is often provided for opposition to capital punishment.
7. *I become angry when a convicted murderer does not receive the death penalty.* This question measures the emotional reason of retribution provided by many for support the death penalty.
8. *When society executes an individual for a violent crime, it is responding to violence with violence.* This question measures the morality reason provided in opposition of capital punishment.
9. *Most convicted murderers would kill again if given the opportunity.* This question measures the incapacitation reason provided for supporting the death penalty.
10. *It saddens me when a person is executed, regardless of the crime they committed.* This question measures the opposite of that measured by question 7. It is the emotional reason provided in opposition to the death penalty.
11. *We need capital punishment to provide law and order in society.* This question measures the law and order reasoning provided for supporting capital punishment.
12. *The poor are more likely to receive the death penalty than are the middle class and rich.* This questions measures the rationale of unfair application of the death penalty provided by

some abolitionists.

13. *Minorities are more likely to receive the death penalty.* This question also measured the rationale of unfair application of the death penalty provided by some abolitionists.

14. *Violent crime rates have been increasing during the past five years.* This question measures the need to get tough on crime provided under the instrumental perspective of rising crime rates provided for supporting capital punishment.

15. *The death penalty serves little other purpose than to demonstrate society's cruelty.* This question measures also measures the morality rationale provided for opposition to the death penalty.

A measure of fear of crime is included in this study and is measured by the following question:

“How often do you fear being a victim of a violent crime - 1 = rarely, 2 = not often; 3 = sometimes, 4 = often, and 5 = very often.” Two measures dealing with religion are also included. One measures the behavioral aspect by asking about attendance: “How often do you attend church/religious services? 1 = almost never; 2 = once a month; 3 = 2 or 3 times a month; 4 = once a week; 5 = more than once a week.” The other measures attitudinal aspects of religion by asking about the importance of religion in a person’s life: “To what extent has religion played a role in your life? 1 = not at all; 2 = not much; 3 = a fair amount; 4 = a great deal.”

Some death penalty studies have combined the questions to form indices of a particular concept, such as the instrumental perspective (e.g., Maxwell and Rivera-Vazquez, 1998). While indices are appropriate in many cases, they may fail to capture differences in each of the fundamental reasons for supporting or opposing the death penalty. Bohm (1992) looked at the eight items

that comprised an retribution index. In a multivariate analysis, he found that the questions actually measured different dimensions of retribution ideology for supporting the death penalty. He also found that the questions explained differing amounts of the variation of death penalty views, and not all questions had a significant impact. These findings suggest that broad indices may not be appropriate to explain the differences in death penalty opinion. Instead, narrower measures are needed. Therefore, the individual measures for support for or opposition to capital punishment will be used rather than indices.

Six variables representing 5 personal characteristics were measured. Gender was measured as a dichotomous variable with males = 0 and females = 1. Race was measured using a dichotomous variable with nonwhites = 0 and whites = 1. Age was measured in years. An ordinal level measure representing college level was measured with freshman = 1, sophomore = 2, junior = 3; senior = 4; and graduate student = 5. Finally, the students were asked their political party affiliation. The original measure had three response categories of Democrat, Republican, and Independent/Other. For this study, two dichotomous variables representing Democrat and Republican political party affiliation are used. The reference group is those who marked the Independent/Other category. In terms of the students, 55% were male, 77% are white, 27% are freshman, 22% are sophomores, 23% are juniors, 26% are seniors, 2% are graduate students, 32% are Democrats, 26% are Republicans, and the average age is 22 years.

## **Results**

The majority of the students favor to some degree capital punishment. In terms of the death

penalty, 14% very strongly favor, 23% strongly favor, 24% somewhat favor, 12% are uncertain, 8% somewhat oppose, 8% strongly oppose, and 10% very strongly oppose. When collapsed into favor, uncertain, and opposed categories, 62% support the death penalty, 12% are uncertain, and 26% oppose it. This is a similar degree of support found among the general population in the U.S. in which 65% indicated they supported the death penalty (The Death Penalty Information Center, 2001). The frequencies and descriptive statistics for the independent variables are presented in Table 1. There appears to be significant variation among the independent variables.

**Table 1**  
**Frequency Percentage Responses and Descriptive Statistics for the Independent Variables**

Question	SD %	D %	U %	A %	SA %	Mean (SD)	Median
Crime is one of the most serious social problems facing society today.	2	9	15	47	27	3.89 (0.96)	4.00
It costs more money to incarcerate someone for life without parole for the crime of murder than it does to execute that person.	10	17	13	37	24	3.49 (1.23)	4.00
I feel the death penalty should only be used for the crime of murder and no other crime, such as rape.	16	24	25	18	18	2.98 (1.32)	3.00
The death penalty is a more effective deterrent than life imprisonment.	10	22	21	29	17	3.20 (1.26)	3.00
Executions set a violent example that leads to further violence in society.	14	42	23	15	6	2.59 (1.10)	2.00
There is almost no danger of sentencing an innocent person to death (reverse coded).	1	6	16	33	44	4.14 (0.95)	4.00
I become angry when a convicted murderer does not receive the death penalty.	19	24	33	18	6	2.69 (1.14)	3.00
When society executes an individual for a	10	24	18	33	16	3.19	3.00

violent crime, it is responding to violence with violence.						(1.25)	
Most convicted murders would kill again if given the opportunity.	3	12	26	43	16	3.56 (0.99)	4.00
It saddens me when a person is executed, regardless of the crime they committed.	20	33	22	18	6	2.56 (1.17)	2.00
We need capital punishment to provide law and order in society.	10	19	23	33	15	3.23 (1.21)	3.00
The poor are more likely to receive the death penalty than are the middle class and rich.	4	14	17	38	27	3.69 (1.13)	4.00
Minorities are more likely to receive the death penalty.	3	16	23	40	18	3.55 (1.05)	4.00
Violent crime rates have been increasing during the past five years.	5	23	22	39	11	3.29 (1.09)	4.00
The death penalty serves little purpose other than to demonstrate society's cruelty.	20	41	18	14	7	2.47 (1.18)	2.00
	<b><u>Rarely</u></b>	<b><u>Not Often</u></b>	<b><u>Some-times</u></b>	<b><u>Often</u></b>	<b><u>Very Often</u></b>		
How often do you fear being a victim of a violent crime?	23	33	30	9	5	2.41 (1.09)	2.00
	<b><u>Almost Never</u></b>	<b><u>Once a Month</u></b>	<b><u>2 or 3 Times a Month</u></b>	<b><u>Once a Week</u></b>	<b><u>More Than Once a Week</u></b>		
How often do you attend church?	48	22	14	13	4	2.73 (0.96)	3.00
	<b><u>Not at All</u></b>	<b><u>Not Much</u></b>	<b><u>A Fair Amount</u></b>	<b><u>A Great Deal</u></b>			
To what extent has religion played a role in your life?	14	23	42	22		2.04 (1.22)	2.00
<b>College Level</b>	<b><u>Fresh.</u></b>	<b><u>Soph.</u></b>	<b><u>Jr.</u></b>	<b><u>Sr.</u></b>	<b><u>Grad.</u></b>		
	27	22	23	26	2	2.55 (1.19)	3.00
<b>Race (0 = Nonwhite, 1 = White)</b>	<b><u>Non-white</u></b>		<b><u>White</u></b>				

	23		77			0.77 (0.42)	1.00
<b>Gender (0 = male, 1 = female)</b>	<b><u>Male</u></b>		<b><u>Female</u></b>				
	55		45			0.45 (0.50)	0.00
<b>Political Party Affiliation</b>	<b><u>Democrat</u></b>		<b><u>Republican</u></b>		<b><u>Indep./ Other</u></b>		
<b>Age (in years)</b>	32		26		42		
						21.94 (3.58)	21.00

Note. SD=Strongly Agree, D=Disagree, U=Uncertain, A=Agree, SA=Strongly Agree, (SD)=Standard Deviation, Fresh.=Freshman, Soph.=Sophomore, Jr.=Junior, Sr.=Senior, and Grad.=Graduate Student.

Pearson’s correlation (r) is reported in Table 2. All except two of the independent variables have a statistically significant correlation with the death penalty measure. Only the measures for college level and age do not have significant correlations. The measures for deterrence, morality, emotional retribution, emotional opposition, and law and order have much larger correlations to the dependent variable than do the other independent variables. Of the significant correlations, all are in the same direction generally found in other death penalty attitudinal studies (Bohm, 1987, 1991; Ellsworth and Gross, 1994). The reasons provided for supporting the death penalty all have a positive correlation, and the reasons provided to oppose the death penalty all have a negative correlation with the dependent variable. As fear of becoming a victim of crime increases, so does support for the death penalty. Both religious measures have negative correlations. Among the personal characteristics, White, males, and Republicans are more likely to support capital punishment than are Black, females, and Democrats. It is important to note that bivariate correlations do not control for the shared effects among the

independent variables. There is a question whether these bivariate relationships will continue in the multivariate analysis.

**Table 2**

**Pearson=s r and OLS Regression Results For Support for the Death Penalty**

Independent Variables	r	B	SE B	β
Crime is one of the most serious social problems facing society today.	.253***	-.030	.039	-.016
It costs more money to incarcerate someone for life without parole for the crime of murder than it does to execute that person.	.338***	.058	.030	.040
I feel the death penalty should only be used for the crime of murder and no other crime, such as rape.	.161***	.043	.027	.031
The death penalty is a more effective deterrent than life imprisonment.	.605***	.074	.038	.050
Executions set a violent example that leads to further violence in society	-.584***	-.035	.043	-.021
There is almost no danger of sentencing an innocent person to death (reverse coded).	-.280***	-.001	.041	-.001
I become angry when a convicted murderer does not receive the death penalty.	.671***	.249	.043	.154***
When society executes an individual for a violent crime, it is responding to violence with violence.	-.518***	-.002	.036	-.001
Most convicted murderers would kill again if given the opportunity.	.394***	.033	.042	.017
It saddens me when a person is executed, regardless of the crime they committed.	-.673***	-.270	.041	-.171***
We need capital punishment to provide law and order in society.	.754***	.423	.048	.276***
The poor are more likely to receive the death penalty than are the middle class and rich.	-.306***	-.005	.038	-.003

Minorities are more likely to receive the death penalty.	-.285***	.023	.040	.013
Violent crime rates have been increasing during the past five years.	.172***	.038	.034	.023
The death penalty serves little purpose other than to demonstrate society=s cruelty.	-.776***	-.494	.048	-.314***
How often do you fear being a victim of violent crime?	.151***	.016	.036	.009
How often attend church?	-.240***	-.049	.037	-.033
To what extent has religion played a role in your life?	-.277***	-.070	.048	-.036
College Level	-.049	-.061	.034	-.039
Age	-.069	.018	.011	.034
Race (0 = Nonwhite, 1 = White)	.263***	.173	.091	.039
Gender (0 = male, 1 = female)	-.212***	.009	.076	.003
Democrat (0=no, 1=yes)	-.195***	.049	.085	.012
Republican (0=no, 1=yes)	.204***	.002	.088	.000
R-Square Coefficient				0.762** *

\* p #0.05.      \*\* p #0.01      \*\*\* p #0.001

Next, an Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) equation was estimated with the death penalty measure as the dependent variable. An advantage of using OLS regression is that it allows for the effects of an independent variable on the dependent variable to be estimated while statistically controlling for the other independent variables. The results of the OLS analysis are reported in Table 2.

The R-square coefficient is 0.762 and the adjusted R-square value is 0.754. Therefore, about

75% of the variance observed in the dependent variable is accounted by the independent variables. Of the 24 independent variables, only four continued to have a statistically significant effect on the dependent variable in the OLS regression model. There is a statistically significant positive relationship between the emotional retribution variables (i.e., I become angry when a convicted murderer does not receive the death penalty) and support for the death penalty. Those who are more likely to express anger when a convicted murder does not get the death penalty are much more likely to favor the death penalty. Similarly, the emotional measure for opposing the death penalty (i.e., It saddens me when a person is executed, regardless of the crime they committed) has a significant negative relationship with measure of support for the death penalty. As agreement with this question increases, support for the death penalty decreases. The measure of law and order (i.e., We need capital punishment to provide law and order in society) has a statistically significant positive effect on support for the death penalty. Finally, one of the morality measures (i.e., The death penalty serves little other purpose than to demonstrate society's cruelty) has a significant inverse relationship with the dependent variable. As agreement for this measure increases, support for capital punishment declines.

The four statistically significant independent variables differ in the size of their impact on the dependent variable. Looking at the standardized slopes (i.e., Beta coefficient in the  $\beta$  column of Table 2), one observes that the morality opposition measure has the largest effect on the dependent variable. The law and order variable has second largest effect on the support for capital punishment measure, and is very close in size to that of the morality opposition measure.

The emotional opposition measure has the third largest effect, and its effect is much smaller than

that of the two aforementioned variables. Finally, the emotional retribution measure has the smallest impact, almost half that of law and order variable.

None of the remaining independent variables has a statistically significant effect on the death penalty measure. The remaining measures of reasons provided for supporting or opposing capital punishment, while having significant correlations, do not have any impact on the dependent variable in multivariate analysis. Fear of crime is not an important predictor of support for the death penalty in the OLS regression model, nor is either of the two religious measures. None of the personal characteristics has a significant relationship with the capital punishment measure. In fact, the personal characteristics only account for a small amount of the variance in the dependent variable.

The personal characteristic measures were entered into an OLS regression equation without the other independent variables. The results are presented in Table 3. The R-square coefficient for this regression model is 0.126, and the adjusted R-square value is 0.118. Therefore, the five personal characteristics account for only 12% of the variance observed in the support for the death penalty measure. The other measures for supporting or opposing capital punishment account for a greater degree of variance in the dependent variable. In addition, none of the personal characteristics reached statistical significance in the full model. This implies that relationships between personal characteristics and support for capital punishment are probably because personal characteristics are proxy measures for other attitudinal reasons for supporting or opposing the death penalty. Once attitudinal reasons are introduced into the analysis, personal

characteristics are no longer important predictors.

**Table 3**

**OLS Regression Results For Personal Characteristics**

Personal Characteristic	<u>B</u>	<u>SE B</u>	$\beta$
College Level	-.035	.061	-.022
Age	-.026	.021	-.050
Race (0 = Nonwhite; 1 = White)	.907	.161	.207***
Gender (0 = male; 1 = female)	-.598	.132	-.161***
Democrat (0 = no; 1 = yes)	-.220	.157	-.056
Republican (0 = no; 1 = yes)	.482	.162	.114**
R-Square Coefficient			.126***

\*  $p \#0.05$ .    \*\*  $p \#0.01$     \*\*\*  $p \#0.001$

**Discussion**

It is clear that the majority (i.e., 62%) of the students in this study support to some degree the death penalty, similar to the percentage in general society. When asked about their attitude on the death penalty, only 14% indicated that they were very strongly in favor and only 10% were strongly opposed. Approximately 24% were somewhat in favor and 8% were somewhat

opposed. While there is general support for the death penalty, some supported or opposed the

death penalty more than others. This implies that support for the death penalty is not a simple

yes or no decision for many people. Rather, it is a graduated position in which most people lie between the two poles of either very strongly support or very strongly oppose.

In the literature, a multitude of reasons for supporting or opposing the death penalty are provided (Bohm, 1987, 1991; Ellsworth and Gross, 1994). What is not clear is which of these reasons are more important in explaining people's differing levels of death penalty views. In this study, it was found that four questions were statistically significant predictors for a person's opinion about capital punishment. Specifically, emotional retribution, emotional opposition, morality, and law and order were the only reasons to have significant effects. It would appear that the literature is correct when it is stated that support or opposition to the death penalty is based upon emotions (Ellsworth and Gross, 1994). Response to crime is frequently driven by emotions. It should be no surprise that the same is observed with death penalty support or opposition.

The morality and law and order reasons, however, had larger effects than did the emotional reasons. The morality position has a negative impact on the dependent variable. In other words, as support for the morality position increases, support for the death penalty decreases. Morality is probably one of the major reasons for abolitionists to oppose the death penalty. It is not surprising that the law and order measure has a positive relationship with death penalty support in this study. There is a general perception in our society that crime is a serious problem. This is reflected in the fact that 74% of the students in this study either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that "Crime is one of the most serious social problems facing society today." In addition, about half of the students either agreed or strongly agreed (incorrectly) that violent

crime rates had been increasing during the past five years prior to the survey (i.e., 1999/2000). It appears that there is a frustration among many with the inability to effectively deal with crime and that the death penalty is viewed as a means to maintain law and order. Many politicians have exploited the issue of law and order. It is also a significant reason in helping to explain the differences in death penalty views observed among the 730 students in this study. In sum, it appears, when taken together, emotional retribution, emotional opposition, morality, and law and order are important predictors of students' death penalty views.

The other reasons for supporting or opposing capital punishment, such as deterrence, incapacitation, unfair application, brutalization effects, did not have significant effects in this study. There are two major explanations for this finding. First, when other reasons are taken into account, such as morality or law and order, these reasons do not have significant effects on people's death penalty views. This is not to say that these areas are not "real" reasons provided by people. Instead, it is that when the shared overlap is taken into account among the independent variables, these reasons do not have significant effects. It is important to note that polls and many death penalty studies look at these reasons one at a time. There is no multivariate analysis. This also explains why all the independent variables, except college level and age, had significant correlations with the death penalty measure, but not in the OLS regression. The second reason is the findings are due to methodical shortcomings found in this study. Most of the reasons for supporting or opposing capital punishment were measured by a single item. In addition, several of the reasons, particularly retribution, were not fully measured. Multiple measures and more rigorous measures could produce different results.

The two measures of religion had significant, moderate negative correlation with the death penalty measure, but had insignificant effects in the OLS multivariate regression analysis. This suggests that these religion variables are actually proxy measures for other reasons for supporting or opposing the death penalty. Once these other reasons were taken into account, there appears to be no relationship between religion and death penalty views. This is not to say that no religious factors help shape death penalty views. As previously indicated, past research has found that religious affiliation has been found to have a significant relationship with death penalty views. Religious affiliation was not measured in this study, and it is possible that the results may differ if this measure were included.

The measure of fear of crime had no significant effect on death penalty support in this study. It could be that fear of crime is not a significant predictor of capital punishment support. Other studies have found no relationship between fear of crime and death penalty views (Ellsworth and Gross, 1994; Seltzer and McCormick, 1987; Stinchcombe et al., 1980). Additionally, this study surveyed college students, who are generally young. Younger individuals tend to be less fearful of crime than do older people (Hale, 1996; Parker & Ray, 1990).

None of the personal characteristics had significant effects in the OLS regression analysis. It would appear that personal characteristics are poor predictors of death penalty views. A similar conclusion has been reported in the literature (Ellsworth and Gross, 1994; Maxwell and Rivera-Vazquez, 1998). As previously indicated, personal characteristics appear to be proxy measures

of internal attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs. Rather than using personal characteristics as predictors of death penalty views, future research needs to measure the underlying factors represented by the personal characteristics. At best, personal characteristics represent only control variables in a multivariate analysis of capital punishment views.

The lack of a significant Pearson's correlation for age and college level needs to be briefly addressed. The other personal characteristics had moderate correlations with the death penalty measure. The lack of a correlation for age supports Bohm's (1987) contention that age is no longer associated with death penalty support. No correlation for college level raises serious questions about the conclusion made by Farnsworth et al. (1998) that college education has a liberalizing effect. The findings in this study appear to support the position of Eskridge (1999) who argues that there is a selection issue at colleges and universities. Conservative freshman drop out of liberal colleges and instead transfer to more conservative institutions, and *vice versa* for liberal students. The university in which the students were surveyed tends to be more conservative than similar Midwestern higher educational institutions.

### **The way forward from primary research**

There is need for much more research in the area of why people differ in their death penalty views. Future research needs to address the shortcomings found in this study. As previously indicated, this was an exploratory study among college students. Future research needs to use better measures that go into more depth than the measures of why people support or oppose capital punishment than those typically found in the literature. Additionally, future research

could include measures for the symbolic perspective which focuses on a person's general political and social views (Maxwell and Rivera-Vazquez, 1998). Other attitudes that can be examined are dogmatism, authoritarianism, conservatism, nationalism, and prejudices (Bohm 1987; Finckenaue, 1988; Harvey, 1986; Tyler and Weber, 1982).

### **Conclusion**

Capital punishment often engenders deeply held opinions. Many of the reasons given, either in support of, or in opposition to, the death penalty have been the subject of many studies. This research casts doubt upon those studies that have analyzed simple bivariate relationships without multivariate analysis.

While emotional, law and order, and morality measures remain positively correlated to death penalty attitudes under multivariate analysis, other variables such as fear of crime, religious measures, and personal characteristics (which earlier studies found using bivariate analysis) were not found to be statistically significant. Emotional retribution, emotional opposition, morality, and law and order were the only reasons found to have statistically significant effects on attitudes about the death penalty.

The results suggest the need for greater attention to and more study of death penalty attitudes using multivariate analysis. This research is important if we are ever to understand why the United States remains so strongly committed to the death penalty while much of the rest of the world has abolished it. In closing, the reasons why people, including college students, support or

oppose the death penalty are deep and intense. It is clear that far more research is needed to fully understand why people differ greatly on the view of capital punishment.

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