

# WEST VIRGINIA'S DEATH PENALTY



**CATHOLIC  
MOBILIZING  
NETWORK**

ENDING THE DEATH PENALTY.  
PROMOTING RESTORATIVE JUSTICE.

## The Facts

- All executions were carried out by hanging until 1950.
- In 1951, after the introduction of the electric chair, electrocution became the official method of execution in West Virginia.
- 94 executions occurred in West Virginia between 1899 and 1959.
- The last execution in West Virginia occurred in 1959.
- Many bills and attempts to reinstate the death penalty in West Virginia have arisen, but none of them have been successful.
- The last state to abolish the death penalty before *Furman v. Georgia*.

### For more resources:

Catholic Conference of West Virginia  
<http://www.catholicconferencewv.org/>

## BISHOPS OF WEST VIRGINIA STATEMENT REGARDING THE DEATH PENALTY

The Bishops of West Virginia said the following regarding pressing life issues in modern culture, including the death penalty: "All human life is a gift from God. We must confront a culture that honors violent solutions to complex social issues – abortion to address difficult pregnancies, euthanasia and assisted suicide to deal with age and illness, and the death penalty to combat crime. In their 1995 Pastoral Letter, "At Home in the Web of Life," the Catholic Bishops of Appalachia counter this "Culture of Death" with a vision of a "Culture of Life." They write that this struggle of all society between a culture of death and a culture of life is also played out at the intimate level in personal relationships. Here the culture of death invades our very souls through addictions and co-dependencies, often leading to abuse and violence, especially against women and children." (2015)

# The Church and State Speak

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## The Church Speaks

### Catechism of the Catholic Church

"The Church teaches, in the light of the Gospel, that "the death penalty is inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person",[1] and she works with determination for its abolition worldwide." (CCC 2267)

### *Evangelium Vitae*

Pope St. John Paul II's encyclical on human dignity, challenges us to be "unconditionally pro-life.": "The case of someone who has done great evil. Modern society has the means of protecting itself, without definitively denying criminals the chance to reform." (*Evangelium Vitae*, 27)

### United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

"Its [the death penalty] application is deeply flawed and can be irreversibly wrong, is prone to errors and is biased by factors such as race, the quality of legal representation and where the crime was committed." (*A Culture of Life and the Penalty of Death*, USCCB, 2005)

### Words of the Popes

**Pope Francis:** "Rendering justice' does not mean seeking punishment for its own sake, but ensuring that the basic purpose of all punishment is the rehabilitation of the offender." *World Congress Against the Death Penalty*, June 22, 2016

**Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI:** "Society's leaders should make every effort to eliminate the death penalty and to reform the penal system in a way that ensures respect for the prisoners' human dignity." *Benin, Africa*, Nov. 19, 2011

## The States Speak

### Innocence

- Nationally, over 160 people have been exonerated from death row.
- For every nine executions carried out in the United States, one person has been found to be innocent.

### Racial Bias

- 76% of death row defendants have been executed for killing white victims, even though African--Americans make up about half of all homicide victims.
- African-Americans are overrepresented on death row. They makeup 13% of the US population but constitute 42% of death row.

### Criminalization of Mental Illness and Intellectual Disabilities

- A study in the *Hastings Law Journal* of recent executions found that "over half of the last one hundred executed offenders have been diagnosed with or displayed symptoms of mental illness."
- The Supreme Court banned the execution of those with intellectual disabilities but states have significantly deviated from accepted clinical methods for determining intellectual disability.

### Overrepresentation of the Poor

- The majority of individuals on death row could not afford their own attorney. In many cases, the appointed attorneys are overworked , underpaid, or lacking the trial experience required for death penalty cases.

### Costly Public Policy

- Multiple studies have shown the cost of trial sentencing, appeals and imprisonment to be much higher in capital cases versus life in prison without parole.

### Geographic Basis

- 2% of all U.S. counties have produced 56% of the U.S. death row population.



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