

## Why can't we be sane about the death penalty?

Thomas C. Fox | Jun. 17, 2009 NCR Today

Eighty-eight percent of the country's top criminologists do not believe the death penalty acts as a deterrent to homicide, according to a new study published this week in Northwestern University School of Law's *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*. The study was authored by Professor Michael Radelet, Chair of the Department of Sociology at the University of Colorado-Boulder, and Traci Lacock, an attorney and Sociology graduate student in Boulder.

Coming on the heels of New Mexico's abolition of the death penalty and amid a national trend away from capital punishment because of concerns about its high costs, executing the innocent, unfairness in application, failure to provide "closure" for victims, and other issues, the study entitled "Do Executions Lower Homicide Rates? The Views of Leading Criminologists" undermines deterrence as a rationale for maintaining the punishment.

Eighty-seven percent of the expert criminologists believe that abolition of the death penalty would not have any significant effect on murder rates. In addition, 75 percent of the respondents agree that "debates about the death penalty distract Congress and state legislatures from focusing on real solutions to crime problems."

The survey relied on questionnaires completed by the most pre-eminent criminologists in the country, including: Fellows in the American Society of Criminology; winners of the American Society of Criminology's prestigious Southerland Award; and recent presidents of the American Society of Criminology. The American Society of Criminology is the top professional organization of criminologists in the world. Respondents were not asked for their personal opinion about the wisdom of the death penalty, but instead to answer the questions only on the basis of their understandings of the empirical research.

The study concludes: "Our survey indicates that the vast majority of the world's top criminologists believe that the empirical research has revealed the deterrence hypothesis for a myth. [T]he consensus among criminologists is that the death penalty does not add any significant deterrent effect above that of long-term imprisonment."

[Read the study here:](#) [1]

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[1] <http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/files/DeterrenceStudy2009.pdf>