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Sociology 1

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Capital Punishment

I. Introduction

A. Introduction of issue

The issue of capital punishment has forever torn our nation. As many plead for the undoubted necessity of it, others pity the cruelty of such an act. One of the most widely debated and never ending controversies is the death penalty. Whether a person is for or against the death penalty it is easy to see the opposition's point of view, even if they don't agree with it. This heated debate has gone on for years and will continue for years to come, because both parties make valid claims on the issue. Those who are for the death penalty support their position with arguments such as the death penalty deters crime, it is more economical than leaving a prisoner in jail for life, and that the punishment should fit the crime. Those who are opposed combat those arguments with ones like the death penalty has never been proven to reduce crime, it costs more to execute a person than to imprison them for life, and two wrongs don't make a right.

B. Research Analysis

The social issue of Capital Punishment will always be one of the most widely discussed problems of our society. Even though there are points for each side of the capital punishment debate, I chose to research the valid arguments in favor of capital punishment and the death penalty. "It is by exacting the highest penalty for the taking of

human life that we affirm the highest penalty for the highest value of human life”(Wolf 6). I think quote sums up the pro death penalty point of view best. There are five justifications in support of capital punishment, which include retribution, deterrence of crime, rehabilitation of other criminals, protection of society, and economical value.

C. Terminology

Capital Punishment is defined as the “penalty of death”(Almonte 5). Prisoners are put to death for committing serious crimes, such as first-degree murder. The four basic justifications are retribution, deterrence, rehabilitation, and protection of society. Retribution can be defined as “the moral vengeance by which society inflicts suffering on the offender comparable to that caused by the offense”(Macionis 226). Deterrence is defined as “the attempt to discourage criminality through punishment”(Macionis 226). Next, rehabilitation is defined as “ a program for reforming the offender to prevent subsequent offenses”(Macionis 227). The last term, societal protection, is “ the means by which society renders an offender incapable of further offenses temporarily through incarceration or permanently by execution”(Macionis 227).

D. Statistics

The United States stands as the only industrial nation in which the federal government imposes the death penalty. “Yet the fifty states have broadly divergent capital punishment laws: Just five states have custody of half of the roughly 3,000 prisoners on death row (Macionis 228). “Thirty eight of the fifty states have Capital Punishment”(Almonte 44). There are many methods that are used to administer the death penalty. “In the U.S., the death penalty is currently authorized in one of five ways: hanging (the traditional method of execution throughout the English-speaking world),

electrocution (introduced by New York State in 1890), the gas chamber (adopted in Nevada in 1923), firing squad (used only in Utah), or lethal injection (introduced in 1977 by Oklahoma)”(Wolf 169). There are many more statistical facts that go along with capital punishment that I will incorporate into the rest of my research.

II. Subtopics

A. Deterrence of Crime

The first reason in support of capital punishment and the death penalty is the deterrence of crime. Those who employ this argument distinguish between general and individual deterrence. The concept of general deterrence is not concerned with the future behavior of the criminal, but with the effects of his or her punishment on society as a whole. “Criminal laws and punishments make examples of criminals to keep other people from harming society through criminal acts”(McCuen 40). Individual deterrence is aimed at the particular criminal. The object of punishment is to teach the offender not to repeat his criminal acts. Since the more serious crimes are the ones that society would most like to deter, it follows that they warrant greater punishment. If a person knows that his or her criminal actions will be punished, that person is less likely to commit a crime. I feel that capital punishment accomplishes both general and individual deterrence. As the ultimate punishment for the most severe crime, it provides the strongest possible reason for people to choose not to become criminals. On the individual level, execution prevents the criminal from committing further crimes. This is important, since repeat crimes is a major problem in contemporary society. “600 repeat offenses that occur within the walls of prison, and the 13,000 Americans killed by paroled or released criminals”(McCuen 75). Deterrence of crime is definitely a good reason in support of capital punishment.

B. Protection of Society

My next reason on why I support capital punishment is the protection of society. The basis for punishment of criminal acts is not retribution or deterrence, but the protection of society. Supporters of this concept argue that criminals should be treated, usually without their consent, by medical means or social retraining in order to eliminate any future problems when they are returned to society. If treatment is not possible, then they should be isolated by a preventive sentence, such as life imprisonment. Capital punishment provides the ultimate protection of society from the criminal by removing him or her from society with no possibility of return. It prevents the murderers and rapists from serving time and supposedly getting rehabilitated. When what really happens is they serve their time and receive parole, just in time to commit another crime. Protection of society is another excellent reason on why I am in favor of capital punishment.

C. Rehabilitation

Another reason why I support capital punishment and the death penalty is the rehabilitation of criminals. Neither the deterrence view nor the protection concept stresses the rehabilitation of the criminal. They do not completely ignore this aspect but it is not their purpose. The main purpose of criminal law should be the rehabilitation of the criminal. The Model Penal Code proposed by the American Law Institute in 1962, for example, stated that an objective of criminal law should be “to promote the correction and rehabilitation of offenders”(Currie 169). Indeed the term penitentiary indicates that jails were to be “places for the criminal to repent of his or her crime”(Wolf 123). The possibility of capital punishment provides a strong motivation for those who have not yet

committed a capital crime to reform their ways and avoid the death penalty. Even though in most cases criminals are given life without parole and rehabilitating them seems like a waste of time. We should not spend the time or money rehabilitating someone who is never going to see the outside world again. This is just one more reason why I support capital punishment.

D. Retribution

The next important reason for why I am in favor of capital punishment is for the retribution. Punishment is viewed as something that an individual earns by his or her behavior. A society defines acceptable behavior and the punishments according to non-acceptable conduct. When a person breaks the law, then that punishment is inflicted as prescribed by the law. Family and friends are not punished for the deeds of another responsible individual. While this concept of punishment may result in deterrence of crime and may lead to the reform of the criminal, these ends are not its primary focus. Retributive punishment is handed out as the necessary return for a specific act. “An eye for an eye”(Wolf 12). This quote sums up what most people feel when they lose someone because of a criminal. If someone murders me, I hope he is killed too. This is why I feel retribution is an excellent reason in support of capital punishment and the death penalty.

E. Economical Value

The final reason on why I am for capital punishment and the death penalty is the economical value. We shouldn't have to pay for some criminal to sit in jail for the rest of his or her life. If a twenty-year-old prisoner is given a life term, society will be responsible for hi or her upkeep for sixty or more years (Wolf 234). The present annual

cost of maintaining a prisoner is enormous. In 1990, the lowest annual expenditure per prisoner was that of Texas, which spent \$2,241 for each adult prisoner; the highest was New Hampshire's \$15,946; and the national average was \$9,094 (Wolf 235). The number of people in jail is growing every year. Our jails are becoming too crowded. If people continue to commit crimes, we are going to run out of space in our jails. There is no point in wasting jail space on someone who has no chance of ever getting out. This economical reason is just another reason on why I am for capital punishment.

III. Summary

A. My Opinion

Capital Punishment is such a widely debated topic it is easy to see why there is so much controversy surrounding the issue. My opinion is that I am in total support of capital punishment. I feel that capital punishment will always be around for years to come. There are many reasons that can support the argument for capital punishment. Such as: deterrence of crime, retribution, rehabilitation of criminals, protection of society, and economical value. The people who oppose capital punishment can also come up with many reasons in support of their position. There are too many arguments for each side for this debate to ever come to an end. Until there are more convincing facts that convince me otherwise, I will always be one hundred percent in favor of capital punishment.

B. What societal changes should be made? Recommendations?

I don't know if any dramatic changes will ever be made. I feel that capital punishment will never be abolished completely. The issue is such a split decision in the arguments, that it would be difficult to change the issue to one side. There is always

going to be states that strongly oppose capital punishment, but there will also be states that will be in favor of it. It will always be a very important issue that will be debated for many years. I recommend that capital punishment should be considered in more cases in the United States. There are too many sick and disturbed people that commit heinous crimes that deserve to have their life taken from them.

IV. Conclusion

A. Final Comments

We have seen that the issue of capital punishment is an important sociological issue that demands our attention. People's lives, those of criminals or future victims, hang in the balance. This issue will never come to an end; it will be debated for many years to come. There are too many reasons that people can argue for both sides of the argument. I feel with the five justifications, retribution, deterrence of crime, rehabilitation, protection of society, and economical value, that capital punishment is a good idea and will be enforced for many years to come.