

# Time to put down the death penalty

New Mexico's death-penalty repeal is a welcome step toward ending a costly, unjust punishment, and other states may follow

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Last week New Mexico became the 15th state to abandon capital punishment and the third to do so in the last two years. Upon signing the death-penalty repeal bill, New Mexico's governor, Bill Richardson, stated: "I do not have confidence in the criminal justice system as it currently operates to be the final arbiter when it comes to who lives and who dies for their crime. If the state is going to undertake this awesome responsibility, the system to impose this ultimate penalty must be perfect and can never be wrong."

New Mexico's decision follows a clear trend of the death penalty's being used less and becoming more marginalised – except in just one area of the country. Last year there were 37 executions in the United States, and 95% of them occurred in the South. New death sentences remained at a 30-year low. While executions may increase this year, so far 100% have been in the South, and most have been in one state – Texas.

Ten other states are considering bills to abolish the death penalty, and much of the debate centres around the risks of executing the innocent and the death penalty's high financial costs. Since 1973, 130 people have been exonerated and freed from death row in the US, contributing to the growing public support for life in prison without parole instead of the death penalty.

The clear risk of executing the innocent has slowed the death penalty down. The years required to carry out a death sentence also exact a huge toll – on taxpayers, victims' families and the inmates themselves. At least a decade passes between sentencing and execution, with many cases taking over 20 years. In California, inmates wait about four years before being assigned a lawyer for their first appeal.

Death penalty trials are even more expensive than the appeals. Capital cases require two separate trials, one to determine guilt or innocence, and the second to determine life or death. A 2008 study found that the average cost to Maryland taxpayers for reaching a single death sentence was \$3m – \$1.9m more than the cost of a non-death penalty case. A study in California found that it costs \$90,000 a year over the normal costs of imprisonment to house each inmate on death row. With more than 670 death row inmates, the state is spending \$137m a year on the death penalty with no executions in sight.

In this time of economic crisis, all states are reviewing government programs that cost a lot and produce very little. In Colorado, a death-penalty repeal bill is supported by murder victims' families who want to use the money the repeal would save to help unravel the still-unsolved murders of their loved ones.

New Mexico has taken a bold step forward by ending capital punishment, which has been a drain on the state in many ways. This may open the door to similar considerations in other states where the death penalty has been shielded for too long from the pragmatic scrutiny that every government programme – especially costly, inefficient and morally troublesome ones – should be given.

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