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How justifiable is the Death Penalty in the United States of America?

Introduction

This Project aims to explore the justification of capital punishment in the USA. I will look at the issues around capital punishment including considering any damaging psychological effects of keeping someone on death row for many years. Furthermore, I will explore the economics of capital punishment, the political issues, religious reasons that might be relevant.

The areas I intend to research are:

which crimes are punishable by death in the US?

is there a crime so heinous that the death penalty becomes ethical as a response?

the process of conviction and detention in death row - what it's like for inmates, the average stay until execution, those whom were wrongfully convicted and the views of the public, the victim's family, the inmate's family and the inmate.

I chose this Project topic because it encompasses many of the subjects that I love such as History, Religious Studies and Ethics and also allows me to explore subjects I may be interested in studying in the future such as Law, Politics and Psychology. Capital punishment is a huge issue in society and world politics. I thought death row would be a fascinating area to explore since there are some very controversial views for and against, and there are also ample different aspects of research. I am also really interested in the Christian attitude towards the death penalty and whether the convicted should be forgiven.

The key terms and definitions used in this Project include:

Capital Punishment - the process of sentencing convicted offenders to death for the most serious crimes

Inmates - a person confined to a institution like a prison

Death warrant - an official document that says someone must be killed as a punishment

Conviction - the decision of a judge in a court of law that says someone is guilty of a criminal offence

Lethal injection – method of executing condemned prisoners through the administration of chemicals that induce death

Death row – a place in a prison where prisoners are awaiting death

Electric chair – method of execution where electricity is sent through the body

Gurney – it is a bed on wheels with straps for when prisoners are about to die

Exoneration – when a conviction from crime is reversed, when there is new evidence of innocence

The objectives of my Project are to research both sides of the arguments for and against capital punishment and to explain them equally and in an unbiased way, and then evaluate to reach a final conclusion after careful exploration and consideration of all arguments and statistics.

Research Review

Source 1

‘Considering The Death Penalty: Your Tax Dollars At Work’ is an article written by Kelly Phillips Erb and published in New York in 2014. This is a secondary source and is open access. This source is relevant to my research question in that it sets out incarceration and imprisonment costs compared to the death penalty costs per year. From this research, I learnt that in California, the annual costs associated with the death penalty is \$137 million compared to the cost of lifetime incarceration of \$11.5 million.

Furthermore, according to a study reference by the Kansas judicial council quoted in this article, defending a death penalty case costs about four times as much as defending a case where the death penalty is not being considered. It showed us that in New York the death penalty costs the state \$1.8 million per case just through trial and initial appeal. People on death row have several trials that cost the government a lot of money, time and effort. I learnt that housing prisoners on death row costs more than twice as much per year (\$49,380) as for prisoners in the general population (\$24,690). This shows that keeping someone on death row costs significantly more than incarcerating someone imprisoned for life. Therefore, considering all these statistics, I learnt that the death penalty may not be sustainable or effective economically.

I conducted a CRAAP test on this source to test the currency, relevance, authority, accuracy and purpose of this source. Firstly, this source was written in 2014 which makes it not very up to date. For this section, I will award one out of the three points.

The article addresses my question and gives me useful information to compare the Imprisonment costs to the Death Penalty costs, showing me if it is economically viable or not and is closely linked with my original question. Therefore, I believe it is very relevant and is worthy of receiving 2 out of 3 points for this part.

Furthermore, the organisation (Forbes) is an American business magazine and reports on politics, technology, law finance and industry. The CEO Steve Forbes graduated from Princeton University in 1970 with a B.A. degree in American history. Forbes has also won many awards such as The International Business of the Year in 2021 and the 2020 Webby People's Voice award for business. Therefore, I conclude that this source has high authority and good reputation so I will award it 3 out of 3 marks for this section.

In terms of accuracy, Media-Bias fact check (Anon., 2015) rates Forbes 'mostly factual' in reporting with a 'high credibility' rating. However, it does not provide any images or diagrams and it was very difficult to find some of the original sources that are referenced, so I am awarding it two out of three for this section.

Finally, the purpose of this source is to inform people around the world on how sustainable the death penalty is financially and therefore how justifiable it is to pump millions of dollars into this punishment. For this section, I will award two out of 3 marks. Overall, this is a good source for academic work because it was published by a well-known company and to uphold its reputation as a trustworthy firm, it is likely that the information is credible. Its reliability is reflected in the score of 10 out of 15. However, if there were any negatives to this source it would be its age as it is now 10 years old. (Erb, 2014)

Source 2

Death Penalty (Amnesty International, 2023) is an article written by several authors and was published in May 2023. This is a secondary source and is open access. This source is relevant to my research question in that it raises awareness about the death penalty and gives statistics to demonstrate how abhorrent the author finds it.

From this research, I learnt that although the use of the death penalty is prohibited in USA for people under the age of 18, the records show that there have been over 163 executions for minors (under 18).

Another worrying feature of the statistics is that they show that one in three people who are on death row are black. This is shocking because it does not represent the population in the USA and therefore is evidence of racism in the justice system.

The article also sets out some of the key arguments for why the death penalty should be abolished; for example how it is inhumane and cruel, discriminatory and how it does not deter crime and how it violates the right to live.

Commented [WS1]: How does it do this? Set out details from the article

These facts can be another argument used to support the eradication of capital punishment as it highlights the unfairness and unjust treatment of the convicted. I also learnt about how capital punishment is still legal in over 80 different countries. The majority of the countries that retain the death penalty are African or Asian-Pacific nations like China, Afghanistan and Iran. However, the greatest exception to this, is the USA with 27 states out of 52 that still use the death penalty. Furthermore, I learnt about the different methods of execution such as lethal injection, the electric chair, gas chamber, firing squad, or hanging.

To check the reliability of this source, I conducted a CRAAP test to make sure the information that I use from this source is as accurate as possible. Firstly, the website was created in May 2023, which makes it very up to date. Therefore, for this section, I will award three out of three marks for currency.

The source directly addresses my project question and gives me useful information backed up by statistics that are recent and are used as evidence to oppose the death penalty. The source showed to me how unjustifiable the death penalty is, therefore, it is a very relevant and useful source and it is closely linked with my original question. Therefore, I believe that this source is worthy of receiving three out of three marks for this section for relevance.

The organisation is well-known and is a reliable charity that is non profitable and this charity is for the welfare of humans. For example on their 'What we do' page it says 'Through our detailed research and determined campaigning, we help fight abuses of human rights worldwide. We bring torturers to justice. Change oppressive laws. And free people jailed just for voicing their opinion.' This quote shows that Amnesty International are very knowledgeable on this topic and their extensive research leads to their reliability. The source is trustworthy in that the charity involves corporate authors and has over 10 million

followers. The CEO, Sacha Deshmukh, has a long record of working in human rights, in fact stretching back over 20 years in this topic. He spent six years as Chair of the Board of War Child UK and was previously the Vice Chair of Citizens Advice in England & Wales. They also have a very good, helping, charitable reputation around the world. Therefore, I will award three out of three marks for this part in authority.

The accuracy of this source is also very high as I have cross-checked most of the information with other organisations. Moreover, (Anon., 2015)- Media Bias Fact Check have rated Amnesty with high credibility and high factual reporting. The website also provides lots of statistics, charts and 2 case studies from people on death row who were saved by Amnesty. I can conclude that this source has high accuracy and so I will award three out of three marks for this section.

Finally, the purpose of this source is to inform people that the death penalty is unethical, that it should be abolished in every country and life is a human right.

This source helps me place my research question into the wider context of the research area associated with the death penalty through these statistics and arguments. All facts and statistics are backed up by strong and considered arguments, however they are very biased and do not address the opposite opinion of 'How justifiable the death penalty in the US?'. For this section, I will award two out of three marks for purpose.

Overall, this is an excellent source for academic work. The reliability is reflected in the CRAAP test results as I awarded fourteen out of fifteen for this source.

Their main focus is to inform the public and raise awareness of human right violations although they could be slightly biased as they believe for the right to live and do oppose the death penalty. If there were any negative aspects to this source, it would be that because it is a charity campaigning for change, it does not acknowledge any possible reasons why the death penalty might be favoured by some countries and therefore I am interested in understanding whether there are any arguments in favour. (Amnesty International, 2023)

Source 3

Just Mercy (Stevenson, 2014) is a book written by Bryan Stevenson and published in 2014 by Spiegel and Grau. This is a primary source and is open access. This source is relevant to my research question in that it gives an informing perspective of the death penalty and explores the injustice for the disadvantaged and people from different backgrounds and ethnic groups. It shows the institutional racism at the heart of the American justice system. It also encourages us to think about the right to sentence someone to death.

From this research, I learnt that one in nine people executed on death row are actually innocent, showing that the rate of error is simply unacceptable when you are considering taking someone's life. Furthermore I learnt that in 23 states, there is no minimum age for which children can be tried as adults which explains why minors under 18 are being put on death row.

In Just Mercy, a black man 'Walter McMillian' is convicted of a murder and is sentenced to death for a crime he did not commit. At the trial, there was only one man who testified against Walter and eventually denied that he ever knew him. His poverty and racial bias led to him being on death row for 6 years before finally being exonerated with the help of Bryan Stevenson. To quote *"Our criminal justice system treats you better if you're rich and guilty than if you're poor and innocent."* The book showed the unfairness of the trial and how it changed Walter's life forever. The book also gave me several accounts from inmates about their experience on death row. Walter's experience on death row was psychologically damaging. He explains it in this quote *"They put me on death row for six years! They threatened me for six years. They tortured me with the promise of execution for six years. I lost my job. I lost my life. I lost my reputation. I lost my – I lost my dignity."*

To check the source more thoroughly I conducted another CRAAP test. Firstly, the book was written in 2014 which made me slightly concerned about its age. For this section, I awarded it one out of three marks for currency.

The source addresses my question and gives me useful information because it is a primary source which gives an eyewitness account and personal view of what it is like to be on death row. It also gave me useful information on ethics backed up with statistics and facts, so therefore I am awarding three out of three marks for relevance.

The author (Bryan Stevenson) is well-known because he is a public interest lawyer who is also the founder and director of the Equal Justice Initiative. He is also a Professor at the New York University of Law and graduated as a student at Harvard University on a scholarship. He has also won many awards such as the National Humanities Award and for his book he won the 2015 Drayton literary peace prize for nonfiction. He became New York Times bestseller and he also won the Carnegie medal for excellence in nonfiction. The Guardian has published many articles on Bryan Stevenson and are quoted as saying that he is a "lawyer devoting his life to fighting injustice" and that he is "America's Mandela". The source is trustworthy in that Just Mercy has a number of stories included that are factually true and Stevenson has a very good reputation for being a brilliant lawyer. Therefore, I conclude that the book is written by good authority and I will award three out of three marks for this section of authority.

The accuracy of this source is also very high as the stories told in this book are actually true. The statistics that are used, I have cross-checked and the images used are labelled. Therefore, I believe that this book is a great representation of an accurate source and therefore I will award three out of three marks for this part.

Finally, the purpose of the book is to inform us of the injustice and racism in the American Justice System and brings attention to this and compels us to confront inequality through a firsthand account of a death row inmate who spends 6 years on there. Although there might be bias coming from an lawyer whose job works against the death penalty, he does have a lot of experience. For this section, I will award three out of three marks.

Overall, this is an excellent source for academic work because Just Mercy is a true story which gives evidence to show how the justice system in America is corrupt, furthermore the author is highly regarded by many newspapers and the public. The reliability is reflected in the CRAAP test score of 13 out of 15. If there is anything negative then it's that the book is written in 2014 so it is 10 years old. The capital punishment system may have changed since then. (Stevenson, 2014).

Source 4

'Eight reasons why the US still has the death penalty' is an article written by Mathew Robinson and published in 2022. This is a secondary source and is open access. This source is clearly relevant to my research question. It gives us many views from the public and references Gallup polls and statistics from the Death Penalty Information Centre.

Commented [WS2]: Add reference

From this research, I learnt about how the death penalty could be seen to provide justice for the victim's family. There is an argument that when a crime is particularly terrible it needs to be punished in equal measure to provide justice.

Furthermore, I learnt about America's long history of violence and racism. There is a link between capital punishment and other acts of violence such as slavery and lynchings and the culture in America has a potential generational acceptance for this type of violence. I learnt about the political pressures in America and how capital punishment is a part of the law and order and how opposing the death penalty is something that does not accord with America's punitive streak. I learnt that capital punishment tends to satisfy the desire for vengeance held by many Americans, especially males, conservative Republicans, and Southerners. In addition, I learnt that in the 2022 survey by global analytics firm Gallup, more than half of Americans say the death penalty is "morally acceptable". Interestingly I learnt that the more Americans are aware of the details relating to the death penalty the less they support it, unless their opinion is rooted in retribution. I learnt that Americans who consider themselves to be Christian are among those most likely to support the death penalty and Americans who hold views closer to the Old Testament are more likely to support the death penalty than those who align themselves more with the New Testament. I learnt that since 2000, 11 states have abolished the death penalty, and three others have imposed a moratorium on executions. A review of these states shows they abandoned the death penalty in face of clear evidence of racial bias, wrongful conviction, and excessive financial costs.

Finally, I learnt that the US tradition plays a huge role in why the death penalty still exists. This source helps me place my research question into the wider context of the research area by giving reasons of why those in favour of the death penalty.

To check the reliability of this source I organised a CRAAP test. The article was written in 2022 which makes it very current. For this section, I gave three out of three for currency.

The source addresses my question by giving us useful information on why some American states still have the death penalty, making me further consider whether there are any justifiable reasons why it still exists . It also gave me opinions from the American public and a different view point. Therefore, I believe that it is very relevant and I am awarding it three out of three marks for this part.

Mathew Robinson is well-known as a Professor of Government and Justice Studies at Appalachian State University. He is past president of both the North Carolina Criminal Justice Association and the Southern Criminal Justice Association, and was recently ranked one of the top 20 most influential criminologists in the world. His work on the death penalty has been cited both in the US and globally. He studied at the Florida state University and has a PhD in criminology. He has published 22 books on crime and capital punishment. He seems it be very knowledgeable on this topic and therefore, I conclude, this article has good authority. I am awarding three out of three for this part.

The source is trustworthy in that the author is well known and has a good reputation in the field of capital punishment. For this section, I will award two out of three for accuracy.

Finally, the purpose of this source is to inform people around the world on the factors of why America still has the death penalty. It gives a different view and perspective on capital punishment. Therefore, I will award two out of three for this section.

Overall, this is an excellent source for academic work because it covers a breadth of issues and relates to the current situation. This reliability is reflected in the overall score of 13 out of 15. He has researched and written many books on this topic. If there are any negatives to this source it would be that Mathew Robinson has not included a discussion about the ethical issues surrounding capital punishment. (Robinson, 2022)

Source 5

‘What does race have to do with the death penalty in Texas?’ is a short online video written by Hannah Wiley, presented by William Igboke and published on the Texas Tribune website on 21st December 2018. This is a secondary source and is open access. This source is relevant to my research question in that it considers the role that race has in death

penalty executions in the US and in particular Texas, which has had the most executions of all US states.

From this source, I learnt that more than 72% of people on death row in Texas are people of colour and 43.1% of people on death row are black. This is in the context of the statistic that only 13% of Texas's population are black, therefore it is more likely for black people to be on death row than a white person which seems to suggest that racism has a role. The connection between punishment and race is further supported by the information provided by NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People). The video showed, in the years 1992 – 1999, that black Americans were three times more likely to be executed than white Americans.

The documentary goes on to highlight problems with the way people are selected for jury service, which enables unconscious or implicit bias to play a role. This is because the Texan court only allow jurors to serve if they agree that they are not opposed to the death penalty. This also led to black people being underrepresented in court.

I also learnt about a convicted black man, Duane Buck who was racially discriminated against in his trial and was sentenced to death in circumstances where a white person would have been imprisoned – i.e. have received a lesser sentence. He appealed and after spending 20 years on death row, the supreme court decided that he should be imprisoned for life instead.

This source helps me place my research question into the wider context of the research area by helping me to consider the issues of justice that are raised when we consider racism – where a system is so fundamentally racist, it calls into question whether it can ever be ethical.

To check the reliability of this source, I conducted a CRAAP test to make sure the information that I use from this source is credible and reliable. Firstly, the online video was created in December 2018 which makes it slightly outdated. Therefore, for this section, I will award one out of three marks for currency.

The source directly addresses my project question and gives me useful information backed up by statistics and graphs that are moderately recent and are used as evidence to inform and show the racism behind the courts decisions The source showed to me how the death penalty may be unacceptably racist and immoral, therefore, it is a very relevant and useful

source as it is closely linked with my original question. Therefore, I believe that this source is worthy of receiving three out of three marks for this section for relevance.

Hannah Wiley is well-known and has a very good reputation. She went to the Northwestern university in America and is currently working for the Los Angeles Times. She has degrees in journalism and Italian. In addition, The Texas Tribune has also a very good reputation as well. It is a nonprofit, nonpartisan political news website and its aim is to promote civic engagement through journalism and to raise awareness about political issues around the world. It is labelled moderately liberal in political terms. However, the organisation's and Hannah Wiley's expertise on this topic is unclear. Therefore, I will award two out of three marks for authority.

The source is trustworthy in that Media bias fact check (Anon., 2015) has awarded The Texas Tribune a high credibility rating and a high factual reporting rating. The online video uses several case studies and includes lots of statistics referenced from other organisations such as the NAACP. Therefore, I will award three out of three marks for this section.

Finally, the purpose of this source is to inform people about the racist factor in the supreme courts about capital punishment and to show how bias the American justice system is. It also gives me first-hand cases of where racism may have a role in play. However, the source does not address the other side of the argument. Therefore, I will award two out of three marks.

Overall, this is a very good source for academic work. This is mirrored in the overall score of 11 out of 15. If there were some negatives to this source it would be that it was written in 2018 and the facts and the data may now be superseded.

Source 6

'For the First Time, More Americans Believe the Death Penalty Is Applied Unfairly in the United States' is an article written by Megan Brennan and was published on the 6th November 2023 by (Death Penalty Information Centre). This is a secondary source and is open access. This source is relevant to my research question in that it considers the percentage of people in America who support the death penalty and who don't since 1940 right up to 2023. The article references a graph from a data poll by Gallup.

From this research, I learnt that for the first time, the October 2023 survey reported that more Americans believe the death penalty is applied unfairly (53%) than fairly (44%) for a person who committed murder. This shows how the society in America is changing their views on what they think is ethical, although there is still a significant number of Americans who are “pro” death penalty. However, between 2000 and 2015, 51%-61% of Americans said they thought capital punishment was applied fairly in the U.S., but this number has been dropping since 2016. When Gallup first asked this question in 1936, 59% of Americans supported the use of the death penalty for convicted murderers. A majority of Americans have generally supported the use of the death penalty since then. In the late 90s public support for the death penalty peaked with 80% of people in favour of it.

To check the reliability of this source, I conducted a CRAAP test to make sure the information that I use from this source is as accurate as possible. Firstly, the article was created in 2023, which makes it very current. Therefore, for this section, I will award three out of three marks for currency.

This source directly addresses my research question and gives me useful information in the wider context of the research area by showing how many people in the US think the death penalty is applied fairly or unfairly and the overall opinion of the public in the US on the death penalty since the 1940s. In the sense that ‘fairness’ has a good link with ‘justifiable’. I will award two out of three marks for this section of relevance.

The DPIC is a non-profit organization funded mainly through grants, donations, and other philanthropic support. The Death Penalty Information Centre provides data and insights on capital punishment to the media, public, and stakeholders. It also publishes news stories and creates reports, press releases, and briefings. The CEO Robin M. Maher has extensive experience in the death penalty field, both domestically and internationally. She has worked in the federal defender system, at the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts, at the U.S. Department of Justice, and as a Professorial Lecturer in Law at the George Washington University Law School since 2010. For thirteen years she was Director of the American Bar Association (ABA) Death Penalty Representation Project.

Furthermore, Gallup is well-known for creating news based on analysis from polling data worldwide. Historically, the Gallup Poll has measured and tracked the public's attitudes concerning political, social, and economic issues. The source is trustworthy in that the Media Bias Fact Check (Anon., 2015) has rated Gallup overall as least biased and mostly factual. It also has a high credibility and is not politically biased.

Megan Brennan is a Research Consultant at Gallup. Brennan uses her expertise in analysis and questionnaire design to advise on Gallup client survey projects. She also writes data-driven articles on a broad range of topics for Gallup.com, including economic, political and business matters. Before joining Gallup, Brennan worked more than 17 years at *The New York Times* as a writer. Therefore, I conclude that Gallup, DPIC and Megan Brennan have good authority and are well known in this field. I will award three out of three points for this section.

The accuracy of this source is also very high. Media Bias Fact Check (Anon., 2015) have rated DPIC left centre bias, and given them a high factual reporting and high credibility rating. Furthermore, they rated Gallup least biased, mostly factual reporting and high credibility. Overall, I believe that this article is very trustworthy. Therefore, I conclude that this article should be awarded three out of three for accuracy.

Finally, the purpose of this source is to inform people around the world of the opinions of Americans on the death penalty. This article addresses both sides very clearly. Therefore, I think this source deserves three out of three for purpose.

Overall, this is an excellent and very reliable source for academic work because Gallup and DPIC both have a high reputations, it is very current, and has excellent authority. This is reflected in the overall score of fourteen out of fifteen. (Megan, Brennan)

Source 7

'Religious studies' is a textbook written by Joy White, Chris Owens, Ed Pawson, Amanda Ridley and was published in 2016 by Hodder Education. This is a secondary source and is open access. This source is relevant to my research question in that it teaches me about religious attitudes towards the death penalty.

This resource highlighted the different attitudes to the death penalty held by different religions and also different denominations within religions.

According to this textbook at one end of the spectrum there are Liberal and Quaker Christians and at the other end, traditional and Conservative Christians. This is due to different approaches to interpreting the Bible. For example, there are different ways that the Old Testament teaches about the sanctity of life and forgiveness. Liberal Christians and

Quakers believe that only God has the right to take a life. They believe that execution goes against the sanctity of life as all life is precious and only God should end it. Liberal Christians follow the quote in the Bible, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:33-34). And in the new testament, Jesus also taught Liberal Christians to "turn the other cheek" (Mathew 5:38-48) and "to love our enemies and do good to them." (Luke 6:35) They think that human life should be respected as every person is made in the image of God. They firmly believe that punishment should be used to reform character.

On the other hand, some Conservative Christians advocate the death penalty by following the Old Testament law 'an eye for and eye' (Exodus 21:23-27) to an extreme extent and in the Old testament it states 'Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood shed'. (Genesis 9:6). Furthermore they argue that capital punishment upholds the commandment 'thou shall not kill' (Exodus 20:13) by showing the seriousness of murder and therefore a serious sentence should be permitted.

Turning to Islam, I have learned that Muslim's believe the death penalty is a severe sentence but one that can be issued for the most terrible crimes. While criminals will be punished by God on the Day of Judgement, Muslims also believe that they should be punished on earth. They think that punishment is part of justice and it stops people from straying down the wrong path. The Qur'an 17:33 forbids the taking of life, 'Nor take life – which God has made sacred, except for just cause.' Most Muslims agree that this 'just cause', for which the death penalty is permitted, is should only be used for the crimes of murder and openly attacking Islam. Moreover, many Muslim countries retain the death penalty, for example Saudi Arabia and Iran. However, there is a small but growing number of Muslims who disagree with the death penalty and call for it to be abolished.

I also learnt what Jews think about the death penalty. Their holy book, the Torah, includes the book of Exodus and so the references above for some Christians are relevant here. The Torah also includes several offences for which capital punishment could be used, and is clear in its guidance concerning the justice of using the death penalty. For example, in Leviticus 24:17-18 it says, "One who takes a human life must be put to death. If one kills an animal, he must pay for it, a life for a life." This shows how some extreme, traditional Jews might be very 'pro' death penalty. Furthermore, as the death penalty is allowed in the Torah, some Orthodox Jews believe that it should be allowed for certain crimes like murder.

Finally, I learnt about the Humanist attitude to capital punishment. They generally oppose the death penalty and feel premeditated killing is wrong. They believe in Human Rights, and for the right to live.

To check the reliability of this textbook, I conducted a CRAAP test to make sure the information that I use from this source is as accurate as possible. Firstly, the textbook was written in 2016, which makes it a bit outdated. Therefore, for this section, I will award one out of three marks for currency.

This source helps me place my research question into the wider context of the research area by giving different perspectives from different religions and what Holy books, like the Qur'an and the Bible, say about killing and capital punishment and if they agree or disagree with how ethical it is. Therefore, it is a very relevant and useful source and it is closely linked with my original question. Therefore, I believe that this source is worthy of receiving three out of three marks for this section for relevance.

The Exam board, (Eduqas) is well-known and is one of the largest in the UK. This shows it has very good authority, therefore I will award this source three out of three.

For accuracy, this textbook is currently on the Eduqas Religious studies syllabus which suggests that this source must be reliable and trustworthy. Educational professionals would not continue to use it if it was not fit for purpose. Therefore, I will award three out of three for this section.

Finally, the purpose of this source is to educate students around the world of the different beliefs from the main world religions on capital punishment. However, it does not include the views of those of no religion.

Overall, this is a reliable source for academic work because the textbook is used by GCSE students and is a well-known exam board. If there material was not reliable had not been passed by the Exam Board then the publishers would not sell many copies of the book and their reputation would be at stake.

Source 8

'Death Row Phenomenon: The psychological impact of living in the shadow of execution' is an article written by numerous authors and published in 2016 in the UK by Reprieve. This is a secondary source and is open access. This source is relevant to my research question in that it describes to me about the clear impact of capital punishment on someone's mental and physical health.

From this research, I learnt about the psychological impact on prisoners under the harsh conditions of death row, with the ever-present shadow of execution hanging over them. This is called a death row phenomenon. I learnt how the isolation and several years of uncertainty can result in a prisoner's sharp decline in their mental and physical state, and how, in many cases, this has led to suicidal thoughts and attempts. One example is, the Brandon Rhode's case in Georgia, USA, where he attempted suicide a week before his execution day. I learnt about how the European Court of Human Rights found that prolonged incarceration on death row constituted cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment in the case of Soering v United Kingdom and Germany. I learnt how death row inmates spend up to 23 hours alone in their cells and how death row inmates typically spend over a decade awaiting execution. However, Reprieve have worked on cases in the US where prisoners have been on death row for over 20 years. Furthermore, I learnt how some inmates have described it as 'living hell' and 'a graveyard behind high walls far from the eye of public.' Finally, I learnt how in some cases in the US, prisoners have been executed in their own cells, as it serves as a reminder of 'what is to come'.

The article concludes that the psychological anguish from awaiting execution is inherent on death row in the US. The isolation in cells, the harsh conditions on death row and the several years of uncertainty, therefore, suggest how death row confinement is unethical, which in turn questions the legality of the death penalty itself.

I conducted a CRAAP test on this source to test the currency, relevance, authority, accuracy and purpose of this source. Firstly, this source was written in 2016 which makes it not very up to date. For this section, I will award one out of the three points.

This article helps me place my research question into the wider context of the research area by showing me the inherent psychological impacts of the death penalty on inmates. This is closely linked with my project question because if living on death row is mentally and physically damaging to the point of suicide, is it justifiable and morally right to keep people

suffering on death row for over 10 years. Therefore, I believe it is very relevant and is worthy of receiving 2 out of 3 points for this part.

Reprieve is a legal action non-governmental, non-profit organisation (NGO). In the about us page they have said 'We are investigators, lawyers and campaigners fighting for justice. We defend people who are facing human rights abuses, often at the hands of powerful governments.' Their main focus is on the death penalty.

Anna Yearley is the Joint Executive Director of Reprieve and manages all aspects of Reprieve's work. Before joining Reprieve in January 2016 Anna worked for the former Leader of the Labour Party in the UK, Rt Hon Ed Miliband MP as his Director of Political Relations and prior to this she worked as the Assistant Political Secretary to the former Prime Minister, Rt Hon Gordon Brown, in No 10 Downing Street. Anna has a first class degree in Politics from the University of Liverpool. In the Queen's Birthday Honour's List of 2021, Anna was awarded an OBE for services to human rights.

The other executive, Maya Foa, was selected as a World Economic Forum Young Global Leader in 2019. She was also named one of Sir Richard Branson's 65 Most Inspirational People in 2015. She was awarded a Soros Justice Fellowship for her pioneering work on the death penalty in 2015, the inaugural Robin Steinberg Innovation Award from the Bronx Defenders in 2018, and the SMK Women Demanding Justice award in 2015. Maya studied French and Italian Literature at Oxford University and did a postgraduate degree in Law. For this section, I will award three out of three for authority.

In terms of accuracy, however, it does not provide any images or diagrams and it was very difficult to find some of the original sources that are referenced. The authors seem to have UK backgrounds which may make them less biased when writing about issues in the US. I am awarding it two out of three for this section.

Finally, the purpose of the article is to inform us of the impacts of living on death row for many years and brings attention to this and compels us to confront the ethics behind it. They use lots of statistics to show why the death penalty should be abolished. However, they do not address the other view of the argument and therefore, for this section, I will award two out of three marks.

Overall, I feel like this is a very useful and reliable, furthermore the organisation is highly regarded by the public. The reliability is reflected in the CRAAP test score of 10 out of 15. If there is anything negative then it's that the book is written in 2016 which makes it quite outdated.

Discussion

The death penalty is a highly debated and controversial topic with strongly opposing opinions.

One of the main arguments used to justify the death penalty is that it is a reasonable and proportionate punishment for somebody who takes away a life. Many people agree with the Biblical statement "an eye for an eye". However on the other side it is argued that executing someone is a violation of the right to life as proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (adopted by the UN in 1948). International human rights treaties declare that "Every human being has the inherent right to life." (Article 6 of the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights \(ICCPR\)](#)).

Although our first instinct may be to inflict immediate pain on someone who sins and murders, the standards of a mature society demand a more measured and humane response. The emotional impulse for revenge is not a sufficient justification for invoking a system of capital punishment, with all its accompanying problems and risks. Our laws, beliefs and criminal justice system should lead us to higher principles that demonstrate a complete respect for life, even the life of a murderer. Furthermore, retribution extends the chain of violence.

Another argument is that capital punishment works as a deterrent. The fear of being executed must surely put off the criminals from committing murder if they know they'll face the death penalty if caught. If murderers are sentenced to death and executed, potential criminals will think twice before killing for fear of losing their own life. This can then potentially save lives and contribute to public safety.

Capital punishment does not deter crime. All studies by the UN and others show the death penalty does not prevent crime any more effectively than other punishments. In fact, all of the states in the U.S with the death penalty, have a higher murder rate than any of the countries in Europe or Canada, which do not use the death penalty. This highlights how the death penalty is not effective and many would argue it deserves to be abolished.

Executing murderers can be seen as a form of justice and retribution for the victim's families. They may struggle with mental health problems and trauma for many years. They may believe the death penalty provides a sense of closure and comfort.

When someone takes a life, the equilibrium of justice is disturbed. Unless that balance is restored, society succumbs to a rule of violence. Only the taking of the murderer's life restores the balance and allows society to show convincingly that murder is an intolerable crime which will be punished. Failing to restore the balance of justice allows society to descend into a rule of violence, where individuals are free to commit acts of murder without facing appropriate consequences. By contrast, the death penalty is portrayed as a tool for upholding the rule of law and demonstrating that murder will not go unpunished.

Carrying out the death penalty could be said to make us all into killers.

However, courts can make mistakes and innocent people are convicted and then executed. For example, the Walter McMillian case, led to him being on death row for 6 years for a crime he did not commit. One in nine people who are executed are actually innocent. This statistic just shows the unacceptable errors and shows how abhorrent it is. If there's potential for one human life to be taken by mistake that's reason enough not to allow it at all. If we support the death penalty, we end up supporting murder, which makes us guilty of hypocrisy.

Housing, feeding and providing medical care for inmates or prisoners can be very expensive. In some cases it is more efficient and easier to execute someone instead of keeping someone imprisoned for the rest of their life.

The death penalty is economically unsustainable. In California, the annual cost for the death penalty is \$137m compared to the incarceration cost \$11.5m. Many states have found it cheaper to sentence criminals to life in prison than to go through the time-consuming and bureaucratic process of executing a convicted criminal.

Polling data consistently shows that a substantial portion of the American public supports the death penalty. While support has declined somewhat in recent years, particularly among certain demographics such as younger generations, a significant proportion of the population continues to express approval of capital punishment. For example, Gallup 2023 showed that 44% of Americans still believe that the death penalty should be used.

The death penalty is discriminatory and is often used disproportionately against people from poor backgrounds or of particular races, or those with mental health problems. This is also seen as gender and race inequality and perpetuating unconscious bias. With respect to race, studies and cases such as the Dwane Buck conviction have shown that a death sentence is far more likely where a white person is murdered than where a black person is murdered. On death row, one in three people are black.

If someone is put to death, they have no chance to change their life or to contribute positively to society. It fails to recognise the societal responsibility for crime (childhood experiences, trauma etc.) and the chance all humans need to make amends. For instance, in Just Mercy, a black man is executed for a murder of a young girl, however the court didn't take into account that he fought in the Vietnam War, had drug and alcohol issues and mental health problems. All these contributed to his vulnerability.

How justifiable is the death penalty in the US?

1. Opinion Spectrum

A. The death penalty is an essential part of a working punishment system

Many right wing Americans, which we're told are largely male republicans, support the death penalty. The total figure from 2022 estimates that 47% of the population support the death penalty. They believe that it is an essential part of the punishment system.

that prevents violence. This is not supported by the statistics about offending but that doesn't seem to have an impact on their opinion. They quote the Biblical principle 'An eye for an eye' as a reason for pursuing this policy. However it is out of context and the Bible does not propose or support the death penalty. In fact, Jesus said that we should forgive those that harm us 77 x 7 times.

B. The death penalty has pros and cons

One of the main reasons that people are pro the death penalty is as an expression of sympathy to the victims of the murdered person. When you consider the harm done to the person who has been killed and the tragic upset of those they have left behind, lots of people can have sympathy for the ultimate punishment- i.e. the death penalty. However, it is not as simple as a binary act of retribution. Simply executing the perpetrator does not diminish the pain of the original crime. It does not look at the underlying causes of the crime (such as societal problems and issues) and it does not prevent further crime taking place. Therefore stepping back, whilst it is honourable to feel sympathy for people who have suffered the death and murder of a loved one, supporting the death penalty is not helping them.

C. The death penalty is an abhorrent abuse of human rights and should be banned.

In 2023, 53% of Americans want the death penalty to be eradicated, (Gallup). They believe that executing someone is violating the right to live as proclaimed in the UDHR. They feel that it is inhuman, cruel and a degrading punishment. Furthermore, they think that the death penalty does not deter crime as shown by many studies by the UN. They believe that the justice system is corrupt and is very discriminatory towards black people and different genders. In the bible, Jesus talks about forgiveness for people who have sinned, therefore killing someone because they have committed murder or rape, does it make it right?

My opinion

In my opinion, I believe that the death penalty is abhorrent and definitely should be banned across the world. Capital punishment is economically unsustainable and morally unacceptable. Murderers who realise what they have done and want to try to live differently, have no chance to change their life or to contribute positively to society. After reading the book Just Mercy, it showed to me how corrupt the American justice system really is and I recognised the racism at the heart of it. One in nine people are innocent, that statistic highlights how flawed the system is. People's lives taken away from them by mistake. It shows how awful it is. On the other hand, I have some sympathy as if a family member of mine was murdered I would want that murderer to be properly punished. However, whilst capital punishment gives retribution to the victim's family, it doesn't achieve anything meaningful, it simply adds more violence to violence.

Conclusion

After looking at both sides of the argument very thoroughly, in answer to the question 'How justifiable is the death penalty in the US?' my conclusion is that it is not justifiable. 'Justifiable' means 'able to be shown to be right or reasonable.' In my opinion, the death

penalty is rooted in violence, retribution and hatred. It goes against justice and reason and is against the beliefs in my Christian faith.

When the arguments for retaining the death penalty are considered, none of them are justifiable. For example, "Is the death penalty economically sustainable when it is compared with the cost of incarceration?" Studies and investigations have shown that the death penalty is much more expensive.

Moreover, "Could capital punishment be justifiable if it was a deterrent to further crime?". The problem here is that the statistics show us that it is not a deterrent and in fact the US has a higher crime rate when compared with other countries that do not have the death penalty.

The question, "Could it be justifiable if it was fair punishment for the crime?". This is a simplistic view which fails to consider the complications of the social structures that mean that the minorities and poor are more likely to have been forced into criminal situations by their disadvantage. The statistics show that the poor are more likely to be imprisoned than the rich, as Bryan Stevenson wrote in *Just Mercy*; *"Our criminal justice system treats you better if you're rich and guilty than if you're poor and innocent."*

Of course, it's not just poverty but racism that is prevalent in the system. A system that is compounded by racism cannot also be fair.

The amount of error in the conviction rate is simply unacceptable when thinking about how many innocent lives have been lost. Mistakes in this arena cannot be made (when we are dealing with human life). The account of Walter McMillian in *Just Mercy* is a classic example of someone who was a victim of this system and his life was destroyed by living on death row for 6 years.

As well as this, the American justice system fails to recognise their own unconscious bias.

This Project could be extended by conducting further research into the ethical issues involved in capital punishment and its wider international practice. This would mean researching non-western systems of justice.

Evaluation

Whilst undertaking this Project, I have learnt about both sides of the arguments, a great deal about the factors behind the death penalty, the financial and economical viewpoint as well as the political and religious side, the racism in the American justice system, why capital punishment still exists today and the percentage of people in America who support the death penalty and the people who want it eradicated.

I have learnt how to find relevant and reliable information that you need quickly. For example, I found it very useful to use Google scholar rather than typing straight into the web. I also found it useful to find books in libraries rather than online searching.

I also learnt to analyse my sources more thoroughly. This is because I found several surprising things when reviewing and CRAAP testing. Some of the things I found were the sources being really out of date or the fact that the author may not be mentioned or may not have any particular knowledge in that area. This shows me that it is very important to

make sure that you look into sources and check their reliability before using them because many people can publish websites and not all may provide completely truthful and accurate information.

I learnt about when gathering research for my project, creating a form or document is really useful. This makes it really accessible all the time. This is linked to how I learnt a valuable lesson about chipping away at a project frequently so you can keep up and not fall behind. During the project, I learnt to catch up on work that I have missed during a lesson.

I have learnt skills such as how to structure an essay, conduct research, analyse research, think logically about my question, utilise and discuss the opinions of others and manage my time accurately. I managed to change my project title and to use my sources and arguments more accurately. I have also realised the importance of keeping the title question in mind throughout the project and it has been very useful to discuss the topic with others. In the future, I will use this experience to be efficient in research, keeping to the topic and restricting my time to relevant activities. I had to have confidence in deleting source material that was not relevant to my title.

My original aims and objectives, as set out in Section 1 of my Project Proposal Form, were to explore the ethics of capital punishment in the USA. After doing my research and deciding on specific sources I realised that I was not particularly considering ethics, so I decided to change my title to 'How justifiable is the death penalty in the US?', meaning that I could use my sources in the best way.

I believe that I have achieved my revised aim in answering the question, 'How justifiable is the death penalty in the US?'. I have come to a clear conclusion using my sources and have answered the question.

There were some limitations to my methodology which included time management, the effect of changing my title on the time required and the time needed to do a final read through and check before handing in.

With hindsight, I should have made an overall plan of the whole process, leading to being able to answer the question precisely.

I my oral presentation, I believe that I (Reflect critically on how your preparation for, rehearsal and delivery of your oral presentation went. What skills have you acquired? Was it well paced? Did you manage to confidently convey the main ideas? Were your visual aids effective? Did you handle questions calmly and confidently, showing good subject knowledge?)

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If you have been inserting (author, date) citations correctly **throughout the entirety of your Project**, you now simply need to click on the **References** tab in the Tool Bar above, then click on **Bibliography** and finally **Insert Bibliography**. The References function will automatically insert a list of all the sources you have referenced in alphabetical order for you. Do not try to override this by attempting to do anything manually.

You may, if you wish, restructure your Bibliography under separate headings to make the different **types** of sources clearer to the reader, for example:

- | | |
|----------------------------|--|
| - Books | Podcasts |
| - Journals | TV Documentaries |
| - Websites | Primary Research (questionnaires & interviews) |

Appendices

Be sure to attach the following:

- ☐ Project Proposal Form
- ☐ Project Plan & Activity Log
- ☐ Copy of PowerPoint slides used in oral presentation
- ☐ Copy of any questionnaires sent out or interview notes or any correspondence sent/received