Faye ChoobeMuuka

Ms. Sally McIntosh

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Capital Punishment

In Alcolu, South Carolina segregation reignedover whites and blacks in the 1940s and railroad tracks separated the two ethnicities. It is in this small mill town where George Junius Stinney Jr. became the youngest person to be executed in the United States in the 20th Century (Erica). Stinney stood at the small frame of 5 feet and 1 inch and was barely 95 pounds. He was just 14 years old, not to mention he was also black (Gittens-Johns). On June 16, 1944, Stinney was strapped into a chair he didn’t even fit into and electrocuted until his life left his body.

Two young white girls were the victims Stinney was accused of murdering. The victims were 8 year old Mary Emma Thames and 11 year old Betty June Binnicker who had gone missing while out riding on their bicycles one afternoon looking for flowers on the wrong side of the railroad tracks (Jones 38-40). Prior to the discovery of their bodies, a massive search party with hundreds of volunteers including Stinney was formed. They were later found murdered in a ditch with severe head wounds inflicted by a large railroad spike (Jones 40).

Stinney was arrested hours after the discovery of the bodies under the notion of him having seen and talked to the girls earlier the day before. With no witnesses but several white officers that interrogated him in a locked room, they got a confession out of him within an hour. Stinney confessed that he “wanted to have sex” with Betty June but couldn’t without first getting rid of Mary Emma, both girls fought back and he ended up killing both of them (Jones 40). According to *Blackamerica.com*, there were rumors of the officers having used ice cream to coerce a confession out of him.

Stinney’s trial was a month after his arrest. He was appointed a tax commissioner as a defense lawyer. There was no transcript of the details of his trial. There were no witnesses called to the stand for him. Lastly, there was never a documented confession in the police files regardingStinney’s case. It took a mere 10 minutes for an entirely white jury to deliberate and return with a guilty verdict. There was no file for an appeal. Stinney was executed six weeks after his sentence (Erica).

This story should never be forgottenand along with the fact thatnobody was on George Stinney’s side. It is one of many horrific reflections of past injustices that the United States is all too acquainted with. While the United States has advanced since that time period to try and make sure mistakes such as these don’t happen, a substantial amount of cases involving Capital Punishment still have discrepancies that make them unfair. Capital Punishment is the highest sentencing of death to the convicted. There are many other arguments for and against Capital Punishment regarding: race, innocence, cost, prison, deterrence, justice, closure, etc.The judicial system we have today is nowhere near perfect and itis flawed enough that I believe thatCapital Punishment should not be administered in the United States.

According to *Deathpenaltyinfo.org*, Capital Punishment is administered in a few different forms such as: lethal injection, gas chamber, firing squad, hanging and electrocution which sealed George Stinney’s fate (“Descriptions of Execution Methods”). Keeping in mind that mistakes happen, not every execution goes through perfectly. Each one of these methods are as menacing as they sound, but to get a better understanding of each I will briefly describe each one.

Lethal injectioninvolves a fatal dosage of drugs that is injected by one or more needles, into a vein (“Descriptions of Execution Methods”). In this process the inmate is injected with anesthetics such as sodium thiopental to put them to sleep. Once the inmate is determined to be unconscious as much as necessary,they are then injected with pancuroniumbromide or pavulon which stops the inmate’s breathing while paralyzing their muscle system. The last drug injected is potassium chloride which stops their heart (“Descriptions of Execution Methods”). In essence the inmate dies from an overdose on the anesthetics accompanied by cardiac arrest and respiratory failure all while they are unconscious.

The electric chair seems to have captured the symbol of the death penalty in the United States and it is part of the electrocution method of Capital Punishment. In this process the prisoner is shaved to help reduce resistance to electricity. Then they are strapped into a chair and fitted with electrodes attached to conductive sponges on their head and one leg. After being blindfolded they are shocked with anywhere from 500 to 2,000 volts of electricity for up to 30 seconds (“Descriptions of Execution Methods”). This process is repeated until the prisoner succumbs to death.

 The Firing Squad is still an optional choice for inmates in Utah (“Descriptions of Execution Methods”). With this method the inmate is usually bound to a chair facing an oval shaped wall. Sandbags surround the inmates chair to absorb their blood. After being veiled by a hood, a white cloth is placed over the inmate’s heart as a target. Five shooters stand about twenty feet away all armed with single rounded rifles except one shooter who is given a rifle with blank rounds. The shooters aim their rifles at the inmate and fires. The inmate could die from loss of blood supply to the brain or a slow death from a fatal wound (“Descriptions of Execution Methods”).

 The Gas Chamber is another method of execution that is implemented by Capital Punishment. This method is similar to some of the other methods because the condemned criminal is strapped into a chair which electrocution, lethal injection, and the firing squad also calls for. The chair which the offender is fixed into is actually inside a gas chamber which is sealed air tight. Underneath the chair is a container filled with sulfuric acid. There is an executioner that stands outside of the chamber and at the signaling of the warden they pull a lever which releases crystals of sodium cyanide. In response a chemical reaction happens which releases hydrogen cyanide gas that fills the chamber. The offender is forced to breathe in the toxic air which eventually causes a lack of oxygen to their brain resulting in death (“Descriptions of Execution Methods”).

The last and least common technique used to carry out Capital Punishment is death by hanging. It is an ancient procedure that dates back to colonial times in the United States. It consists of an inmate being blindfolded before or after binding them on their hands and legs. A noose is placed around their neck with the knot located behind their left ear. The inmate is placed standing over a trapdoor and when it’s opened they fall through. Their death can be instant with their neck being snapped. If the inmate isn’t weighed carefully prior to the execution instead of a quick death they can dangle after the fall and die a slow death from asphyxiation (“Descriptions of Execution Methods”).

The United States is not a third world country. With that knowledge I find it hard to believe a nation this far advanced still carries out punishments as barbaric as Capital Punishment. Not one of the methods used is humane because there is no humanity in taking a human life. Former Mayor of New York, Edward Koch would disagree with this perception because he is a supporter of Capital Punishment.

The next few points made will discuss more reasons whyCapital Punishment should be abolished in the United States along with reasons why supporters of the death penalty disagree. Koch published an essay which appeared in *The New Republic*called, “The Death Penalty: Is It Ever Justified?”He believes that the death penalty as Capital Punishment helps reaffirm the preciousness of life. In this essay he attempted to break down several solid arguments against Capital Punishment based on his governmental experience.

The first argument Koch touched based on was in regards to death as a punishment for a crime which violates the “cruel and unusual” clause of the Bill of Rights. In this point he spoke about how opponents of Capital Punishment often try to use horrific tales of the complications in some of the methods used such as: hanging, electrocution, and the gas chamber; in order to sway followers. Due to these real horror stories some states such as North Carolina and Texas have switched over to lethal injection as their primary method. Koch believed that switching methods wasn’t the primary issue for Capital Punishment skeptics, but instead it was the notion that “death” is barbaric. His dispute to this consists of the necessity in needing a punishment this satisfactory to fit the heinousness of the crime, all in the name of justice (Koch 576).

Among other things, Koch fails to address whether Capital Punishment does in fact violate the “cruel and unusual” clause in the Bill of Rights. There is no question that it does fail to correspond with the Eighth Amendment in the clause because it is inhumane to take the life of any person. There are so many accounts including Stinney’s which have complications that result in slow deaths which is cruel and painful. No matter how much discomfort is attempted to be minimized by choosing one method over another, each one still reaches the same outcome in the execution of the criminal.

Another point that Koch brings up is in reference to Capital Punishment being administered in a discriminatory manor. He believes that death penalty is no longer the problem it once was because the appealing process for prisoners is much lengthier and a painstaking process. He again speaks of justice not being applied if a few people are favored (Koch 578).

Koch seems to express a lot of his own beliefs instead of showing statistics. If he included factual information along with his emotional ties then he would see the light more like former Governor George Ryan did. In a college level English reading book called *Current Issues and Enduring Questions*, a speech was reprinted by Governor Ryan that announced his commutation of prisoner’s in Illinois with a death penalty sentence (Ryan 586). The same book also contain Koch’s essay. According to *Merriam-webster.com*, commutation is the lessening of a sentence, for example reducing a death penalty sentence to life imprisonment. Days before Ryan left office he opted to commute all the prison sentences in Illinois due to his own reasons and cases that he personally worked with to establish innocence of inmates on death row.

Governor Ryan and his team helped in the exoneration of seventeen cases of Capital Punishment. Ryan saw the unfairness and flaws in the system of the death penalty as a whole. Archbishop Desmond Tutu wrote to Ryan him stating, “to take a life when a life has been lost is revenge, it is not justice.” He also said that justice allowed for mercy, clemency, and compassion (Ryan 588). While Koch seemed to diminish the fact that discrimination is still a big issue in decisions of Capital Punishment, Ryan brought it to the forefront. More than two thirds of inmates on death row are in fact African-American. Ryan also found that in the state of Illinois there were more than 160 death row inmates, of that number 35 were convicted by all-white juries and the convicts were black (Ryan 589). In a study conducted by Ryan and his own team, they found that juries were more likely to go for a death sentence if the victim was white rather than black in exact proportions, three and a half more times likely (Ryan 596). Ryan found these statistics in his state alone so you can imagine how unfair the statistics would prove to be on a larger scale of the entire United States. Aside from the discrimination, out of the total 160 death row inmates 46 were convicted under the testimony of jailhouse informants (Ryan 589). There is no justice in any of this.

Ryan also dealt with two sets of families that are affected by the results of Capital Punishment, the victims’ family and the criminals’ family. When murder is what an inmate is being convicted of, the family suffers. Going through the prosecution process is emotionally draining for every family member. They are forced to relive the gruesome memories of the loss of their loved one. Supporters of Capital Punishment feel that this sentencing brings closure to the families when it fact all it does is bring more sadness or anger. If anger is the case then Capital Punishment should really be thrown out as a form of punishment because the sanctioned killing is revenge for the families and it is veiled in the name of justice.

Most families want the memory of their loved one to simply be laid to rest so that their soul can rest in peace. These trials are often long and drawn like Koch mentioned in his essay. Ryan got to also meet with the people who are less favored in these situations which are the inmate’s family. In meeting with these families he realized that pain and suffering was a double sided sword. These families in some cases have to live with the fact that their loved one actually was capable of committing a crime that resulted in the loss of another human being. These families are innocent which is what supporters of Capital Punishment sometimes fail to remember. In some cases the same family members know that their brother, son, or father are completely innocent of the allegations that they’ve been accused of yet they must watch them suffer and may even have to watch them perish before them if they are executed (Koch 590). The fact that innocent people may be sitting in jail is what fueled Governor Ryan’s decision to commute inmates the most.

Capital Punishment advocates believe that deterrence for future criminals will be part of the result in continuing death sentences. This notion is wrong and has been proven time and again because it only works for the criminals who are executed. In most cases the homicide rate is increased in areas that still use Capital Punishment. It is also more expensive to pay for a criminal on death row it can cost millions of dollars which can all be confirmed at *Idebate.org*.

The death penalty is intended to be the highest form of punishment for a criminal. Why then can’t we punish criminals instead of letting them die? Former President Abraham Lincoln once quoted this about the Civil War which was one of the sorriest chapters in American history, “there is no honorable way to kill, no gentle way to destroy. There is nothing good in war. Except its ending(Ryan 596).” President was correct; the answer in changing Capital Punishment has always been in front of us. We must use life imprisonment as an alternative form of punishment instead of taking more unnecessary lives. It is less expensive to house a criminal than put them to death. Criminals who are truly guilty will have a chance to sit in jail for years and think about the consequences of their actions and have a chance to change. This is the fair way to give everyone a chance. If life imprisonment had been an option in cases like Stinney’s then maybe there would have been more time to save him.

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