

**Inland Valley Chapter of Death Penalty Focus
Essay Contest 2010**

First Place in Middle School Division:

“Life Over Death” by Melissa Spangler, St. Mark's Episcopal, Upland, CA

It is a matter of life or death! One of the most vital decisions that the state of California is facing today is whether or not to eradicate the death penalty. While some view it as being a very important tool in preserving law and fighting crime, most see the death penalty as being barbaric. Those in favor of life without parole assert that the death penalty violates the clause prohibiting "cruel and unusual" punishment in the Eighth Amendment of the Bill of Rights. Further discourse regarding the death penalty reveals that many citizens are against using death as a vengeance. Why should California be imitating the worst possible behavior of its most menacing criminals? Would a life sentence in jail be a better solution to deter crime? In order for California to justify the commutation of those currently on death row to life without parole, it is necessary to explore the retribution, ethics, cost and overall effectiveness surrounding the capital justice system.

Through history, the usage of the death penalty for retribution has been debated by numerous societies. At present, the United States is in the minority of nations that still use the death penalty for certain crimes. A majority of our own society has moved past the primitive idea of "an eye for an eye" as a form of retaliation. It is believed by them that this philosophy of revenge leads to a perpetual cycle of violence that only makes matters worse. As stated by Gandhi, "an eye for an eye makes the whole world blind." Does a justice system that supports retaliation through killing put an end to violent crime? Of course not! It only sends the wrong message to society. By continuing to carry out the death penalty, the government is only bringing themselves down to the level of the cold-hearted criminals that they are trying to punish. The alternative to the death penalty, life without parole, is definitely a more ethical form of punishment.

Does it make sense to use murder as a punishment for someone who committed murder? When a person commits a crime, it is instinctive to target anger and outrage by severely punishing and torturing the criminal for the harm that they have caused their victim. However, this method only generates more violence and has a dehumanizing effect on our society. Vengeance does not alleviate pain or grief! It only succeeds in widening "the circle of violence." Furthermore, sentences to the death penalty tend to perpetrate social injustices that impose classism and racial discrimination. This creates a criminal justice system whereby the mentally ill, the poor, and even innocent people are executed, while the rich and guilty have a greater chance of freedom. At least 400 innocent people in the United States have been convicted and imprisoned for capital crimes in this country. Some of these people spent up to twenty-five years in prison before their innocence was proven. Others were executed. Choices have to be made! California needs the moral courage to abolish the death penalty! Why not choose the punishment that is morally correct and causes the criminal lifelong suffering? Life without parole is an effective, ethical infliction. Perhaps it is time to "kill" the death penalty!

The death penalty is a tremendously expensive and wasteful program! Millions are being spent on a single death sentence that is unlikely to even take place. At a time of distressing budget

cutbacks that affect every resident in California, why are we pouring money into a system that has no apparent benefits? A death penalty case requires more pre-trial time, more experts, greater funds, and twice as many attorneys in comparison to permanent imprisonment. On the other hand, life without parole ensures a prompt punishment for serious criminals, protects our communities and saves California millions of dollars. In a recent report released by the ACLU of Northern California, California, with the largest death row in the country, spends 137 million dollars annually on capital punishment, while life without parole would cost only 11.5 million dollars a year. This would be a significant savings of over 125 million dollars during our current financial crisis! This money could be spent on effective crime reduction efforts, resolving unsolved cases, and expanding victim services. Shockingly, California is on course to spend one billion dollars on the death penalty by 2015! It is astonishing to think that every dollar spent on a capital case is a dollar we could spend somewhere else, especially since only one in every hundred people who have received the death sentence in the past thirty years has actually been executed! Our current use of capital punishment is highly ineffective!

Are executions effective in deterring crime? There is no evidence that it averts crime more successfully than a sentence of life without parole. The reality is that capital punishment has *never* been a deterrent. In fact, states that have abolished the death penalty have much lower murder rates than those who still use capital punishment as a form of justice. Law enforcement officers find the death penalty to be an ineffective crime fighting tool. In a recent national poll, they rank the death penalty as "the least effective use of taxpayers' money among the programs to fight crime" and also state that "the death penalty does little to prevent violent crimes, because perpetrators rarely consider the consequences when engaged in violence." It would be better for society if the murderers served their lifetime in prison reflecting upon their wrongful actions and hopefully making themselves more "productive" inmates for the remainder of their natural life.

California needs to commute the sentence of the men and women currently on death row to life without parole. This decision can be justified by taking into account the controversial areas of retribution, ethics, cost, and overall effectiveness of the capital justice system. The majority of Californians are upset that millions of dollars are being wasted on an unethical system that is clearly ineffective. We need to take a stand! Hopefully, one day the death penalty will be a relic of a past era, along with slavery and segregation!