

What we sacrifice on Death Row

By Nancy Oliveira
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The best-kept secret in California is the real cost of the death penalty system.

I remember my first PTA meeting at my son's public high school in San Francisco. Parents discussed how they were going to spend the money they had accumulated from their fundraising efforts. The group decided to spend a portion on photocopying books so that students would not have to share. I was shocked to learn that our school did not have enough money to provide each child with a book - so I rolled up my sleeves and joined the fundraising team. Our efforts supplied the students with books, sports uniforms, musical instruments, computers and printers. That was 16 years ago. I didn't know how good we had it. If the governor's proposed funding cuts take effect for the coming fiscal year, California will drop from our current rank of 49th to 50th in the country for per pupil funding for education.

But for some reason, the state's coffers seem to be wide open when it comes to carrying out the death penalty in California. Most people think we save money with executions - that it is cheaper to execute prisoners than to lock them up until they die of old age, illness or injury.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

We spend an estimated \$117.35 million annually to keep the death penalty on the books in California when we have an alternative: permanent imprisonment. This sentence costs far less - about \$23 million a year - and is a severe, swift and certain punishment. It allows the victims' families to move on with their lives, knowing that the convicted murderer will never be free and society will be safe.

Capital cases are expensive because they are so complex; they require more lawyers, more experts, an extensive jury selection process, and two trials (one to determine guilt and one for sentencing) - all constitutionally required to help prevent the conviction and execution of the innocent.

Conversely, executing those on Death Row (673), or waiting for them to die of other causes, will cost California an estimated \$4 billion more than if they had been sentenced to permanent imprisonment.

Every tax dollar spent on executions is a tax dollar not available for education. Why are we willing to spend so much money trying to kill prisoners and not on the education of our children? What could \$117.35 million dollars a year buy for our public schools?

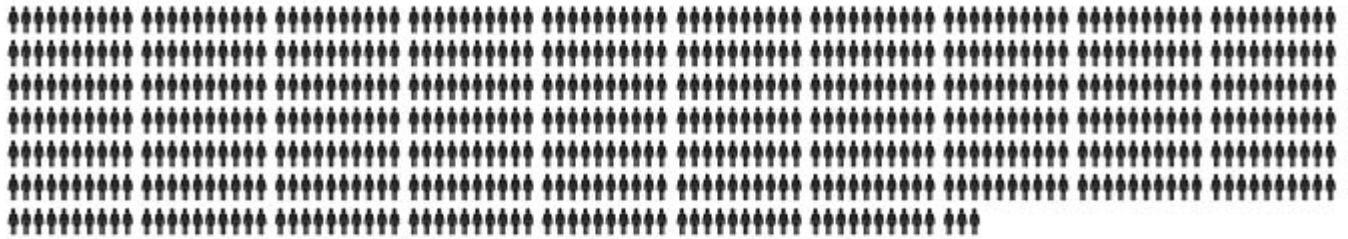
The real cost of the death penalty is what we sacrifice for it. Perhaps we should join all the other Western democracies that have abolished capital punishment and put our tax dollars to better use.

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California's Death Row

ABOUT THE DEATH ROW POPULATION

Number of people currently on Death Row: **673**



Total number of executions 1978-2008: **13**



Average time served on Death Row before execution: **17.5 years**

Number of Death Row inmates to die of other causes: **59**



Number of innocent people freed from California's Death Row: **6**



YEARLY COSTS OF CURRENT DEATH ROW TO CALIFORNIA TAXPAYERS

Money we would save every year if everyone on Death Row was condemned to permanent imprisonment: **\$117.35 million**

Yearly per inmate costs above permanent imprisonment: **\$174,368**

Housing individuals on Death Row: **\$90,000**

California Supreme court – Processing Death Penalty cases: **\$21,902**
 Attorney General – Prosecuting Death Row cases: **\$19,316**
 Office of the State Public Defender – Defending Death Row cases: **\$21,010**
 Habeas Corpus Resource Center – Defending Death Row cases: **\$22,140**

Housing individuals on Death Row **\$60.5 million**

California Supreme court: Processing Death Penalty cases **\$14.74 million**

Attorney General: Prosecuting Death Row cases **\$13 million**

Office of the State Public Defender: Defending Death Row cases **\$14.14 million**

Habeas Corpus Resource Center: Defending Death Row cases **\$14.9 million**

PROJECTED COSTS FOR A NEW DEATH ROW FACILITY TO REPLACE CURRENT FACILITY AT SAN QUENTIN

	Cost per inmate	Total costs
Construction costs:	\$594,000	\$400 million
Maintenance for 20 year:	\$1.8 million	\$1.2 billion

WHAT ELSE COULD WE GET FOR \$117 MILLION A YEAR?

- 1,900** new CHP officers
- 2,100** new teachers
- 103,000** students at UC

Source: ACLU

John Blanchard / The Chronicle

California's Death Row. San Francisco Chronicle graphic by John Blanchard