

November 22, 2008

Your Turn: It is death by geography

By Rita Kresha

Thank you for Daniel Borenstein's column laying out how the death penalty sentence is bankrupting some counties, especially Alameda and Contra Costa.

Alameda County ranks fourth in total death sentences since 2000, while nearly three out of four homicides go unsolved.

Bottom line is that \$14.3 million or more was wasted seeking execution since 2000.

Contra Costa's homicide rate has been rising, despite the high number of death sentences, while nearly two-thirds of homicides go unsolved.

Alameda County has four times more death sentences than L.A. and nine times more than Fresno County. While the vast majority of California counties have largely abandoned execution in favor of simply sentencing people to die in prison, just 10 counties continue to aggressively pursue executions. You might call it death by geography.

Kresha is a resident of Oakland.



November 22, 2008

Your Turn: Borenstein column right about the death penalty

By Beth Weinberger

Thank you for Daniel Borenstein's thoughtful and eye-opening column on the unacceptable costs of the death penalty to the people of California.

Although he focused on the statewide costs, it is important for East Bay readers to realize that Alameda County is in the top five of counties that overzealously pursue the death penalty at an excessive cost of more than \$1 million per case higher than life in prison.

This in a county that does not have the funds and resources to actively investigate many cases, leaving unapprehended murderers out in our communities to continue killing.

I agree with Borenstein that California should follow New Jersey's example in concluding that the death penalty is too costly, does not deter crime, risks execution of innocent people and undermines our commitment to the sanctity of life.

California needs to abolish the death penalty and sentence murders to die in prison, also known as life without parole.

Weinberger is a resident of Oakland

EAST BAY EXPRESS

January 7, 2009

HALT DEATH SENTENCING

As an Oakland resident, I care deeply about unsolved crime and violence in Alameda County. I have already lost two family members to murder, and as a mother of six adult males and one female, I need this cycle of violence to end. Crime in Oakland is not only prolific in my African- American community but it has now spread to areas that have been previously sheltered from crime.

When we take a look at unsolved crime in Alameda County, there may be an element that can help solve crimes — a moratorium on death sentencing.

Without the funding to provide more highly skilled technicians to crack the many unsolved murder cases in Alameda County we are literally allowing killers to get away with murder.

How much can we truly expect from our law officials when their hands are financially tied behind their backs? Did you know that for each person sentenced to death row in Alameda County the money comes from the county budget. It cost \$1.1 million dollars more to sentence someone to death rather than sentencing them to permanent incarceration. These are people who will most likely die of old age before being executed, however, the governor decided to put \$250 million dollars back into a deficit state budget to provide special housing for those on death row. Logically speaking, there is no logic in doing this. Ask our governor to take this \$250 million dollars and place it where it will make the biggest difference — getting more cold cases solved. Our biggest concern isn't those locked away for murder, it's the ones on the street that have not been caught and can murder again and again.

If the governor, on a statewide level, and the district attorney, on a local level, call for a moratorium on death sentencing, millions of dollars will be freed up IMMEDIATELY. A moratorium on death sentencing has been established in the past by those who weighed the cost carefully and choose to realistically tackle the problem of unsolved crime.

Delane Sims, Oakland

January 8, 2009

Money-saving idea

I AGREE with Evangeline Bennett in her Dec. 31 letter that, in an effort to balance our state budget, we can start by looking at the millions of dollars we are wasting by keeping 648 prisoners on death row.

Bennett suggests we "get rid of the jackals." (I think she means executing all the prisoners.)

This is exactly what the state has been trying to do.

But because we have due process, which attempts to avoid executing innocent people, it is impossible to simply do that.

However, do not despair.

Our governor could commute all death sentences to permanent imprisonment and we would save \$114 million each year in housing and more millions in legal fees. A vast majority of those on death row die of old age, diseases or suicide and are never executed anyway.

Also, we would not have to waste another \$200 million on completing the new death row.

Richard M. Doberstein
Fremont



January 12, 2009

Expensive failure

JOHN POYNER'S Jan. 4 Viewpoint piece, "Capital punishment is justice for California," is based on false and misleading statements.

He repeatedly cites what he calls a "definitive anthology" without ever revealing that this publication was created by the public relations arm of the California District Attorneys' Association specifically to promote the death penalty.

A Public Records Act request by the San Francisco office of the ACLU of Northern California revealed that the association recruited individuals to write articles for the publication that would provide the "spin" they wanted.

Notes of the meetings reveal that the association first asked the person they deemed the state's most respected expert to provide an article saying the death penalty has a deterrent effect. This expert refused, telling them that there is no evidence to support that conclusion and that people who claim to find a deterrent effect simply do so based on their personal views.

The association then chose to publish a piece by a professor of marketing. Californians deserve the truth when it comes to the death penalty, not marketing.

The truth is, it's an expensive failure.

Natasha Minsker
Death penalty policy director

San Francisco



January 12, 2009

Death penalty

JOHN POYNER (Jan. 4 Viewpoint) argued for the death penalty with false statements that hurt victims like me. He claimed that the death penalty brings peace and safety to victims.

As the spokeswoman for California Crime Victims for Alternatives to the Death Penalty, I can say that hundreds of murder victims' family members across California disagree: The death penalty does not make us feel better or safer.

Poyner said that if the death penalty were administered faster, it would have saved Byron Schletewitz whose murder was arranged by Clarence Ray Allen from prison.

But Allen was not awaiting execution when Schletewitz was murdered. Speeding up executions would have made no difference.

We put a price on victims' lives every day when we allow a few token monsters to be charged with capital murder while tens of thousands of murders go unsolved.

Speeding up the death penalty will only take us closer to executing an innocent person while wasting hundreds of millions.

We can't afford to fix capital punishment. We can, like most civilized countries in the world, live safely without the death penalty.

Judy Kerr

**California Crime Victims for Alternatives to the Death Penalty
San Francisco**

The New York Times

March 1, 2009

Cost of the Death Penalty

To the Editor:

Re “In Push to End Death Penalty, Some States Cite Cost-Cutting” (front page, Feb. 25): California is paying more for its dysfunctional death penalty than any other state. Our comprehensive analysis revealed that the death penalty costs California taxpayers more than \$137 million each and every year.

This study was the first to review the accounting records of actual trials in California, including records of time spent on the case by prosecution staff members. These records revealed that one death penalty trial cost more than \$10 million, and another required more than 20,000 hours of prosecution time. One county could not hire needed police officers because of outstanding bills from a death penalty case.

Like the majority of our states, California wastes resources on the death penalty while most murders go unsolved and most killers walk the street. It's time to invest in real justice for all, and stop wasting money on symbolism for a few.

Natasha Minsker
Death Penalty Policy Director
A.C.L.U. of Northern California
San Francisco, Feb. 25, 2009



April 20, 2009

Justice for Sandra Cantu

MY HEART goes out to the family of Sandra Cantu.

I agree with the family that this killing is especially grotesque because it was an innocent 8-year-old girl who was senselessly slain.

But it also disturbs me that Joe Chavez, Sandra's uncle, repeatedly has been calling for the death penalty.

I understand the family's need for justice.

Real justice would right the wrong that was committed. It would fix the broken, heal the wounds and most of all, it would bring back Sandra to us all.

But executing the killer now will do none of that. Killing Melissa Huckaby for the slaying will only cause another innocent family to grieve the death of their loved one.

At this time, our hearts also should go out to Huckaby's grandmother Connie Lawless and grandfather Rev. Lane Lawless. They do not deserve to suffer any further from this.

Richard M. Doberstein

Fremont

April 26, 2009

Death penalty costs

Your extensive review of the Rex Krebs case touched on many of the most important aspects of the case but neglected one of great public interest: the enormous costs of the trial and death sentence.

The ACLU of Northern California conducted a comprehensive analysis of the costs of the death penalty in California. Our report, *The Hidden Death Tax*, was the first to review actual accounting records from California trials. The Rex Krebs case was one of ten cases we profiled. See http://www.aclunc.org/docs/criminal_justice/death_penalty/the_hidden_death_tax.pdf

County records reveal that the entire Krebs trial cost \$2.8 million. The prosecution costs alone exceeded \$1 million. Prosecution staff logged more than 8,700 hours on the case. By comparison, a case with similar facts in which the prosecution sought permanent imprisonment instead of death cost less than \$500,000.

As your articles note, Krebs will almost certainly die in prison of natural causes, just like people condemned to permanent imprisonment. But, because he is on death row, we will continue to pay a premium for the enormous added costs of housing him there, and for the mandatory appeals required only in death penalty cases.

The death penalty wastes hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars — resources that could be put to better use elsewhere. If we invested these dollars in solving unsolved crimes, for example, we would all be safer.

Natasha Minsker

Death penalty policy director for the ACLU of Northern California, San Francisco

SFGate.com

April 27, 2009

D.A.'s only option?

Your paper and two others had headline news (Wednesday) about Contra Costa County District Attorney Robert Kochly and his decision to save money by refusing to prosecute misdemeanors. Amazing - after 35 years in office, he thinks that is his only option? He knows, I'm sure, that the county could save \$1.1 million per case if he stopped pursuing death sentences. Contra Costa County has one death penalty case active at this time; converting the sentence to permanent imprisonment without parole would put his budget in balance.

RITA KRESHA Oakland

Stockton Record

May 16, 2009

Death penalty debated

Congratulations on your bold stand and persuasively argued editorial on the debilitating costs of the death penalty in California.

Apart from the moral question, our economic situation, which we are still a long way from resolving, demands a new look at the steep costs of crime and punishment. The spiralling cost of keeping death row in operation instead of a safe, sane alternative like life imprisonment (criminals safely off the streets) is the second-best reason I've heard for abolishing and finding alternatives to the death penalty.

Tom McMahon

Richmond

Thanks for your fine editorial May 7; very timely with the child murder in Tracy coming into the justice system.

I'll quote your profound statement, "There is little justice surrounding the death penalty. It is always delayed and delayed and delayed, condemning the victim's family to twist in a sort of penalty purgatory".

Paying for the crime by a lifetime without freedom is a lot more revenge for the victim's family and all of society.

Then as you pointed out, there are the shocking costs.

Rita Kresha

Oakland

Thank you very much for your editorial pointing out the horrendous cost of carrying out the death penalty and the fact that it does not deter crime. I agree that California cannot afford to keep pouring out tens of millions of dollars to continue capital punishment.

Esther Mohler Ho

Hayward