



Capital punishment, also **referred to as** the death penalty, is the killing of a **criminal** who has been **sentenced** to death by a **court**. In most cases it is used for murder, but the death penalty has also been **applied to rape, treason,** and other crimes.

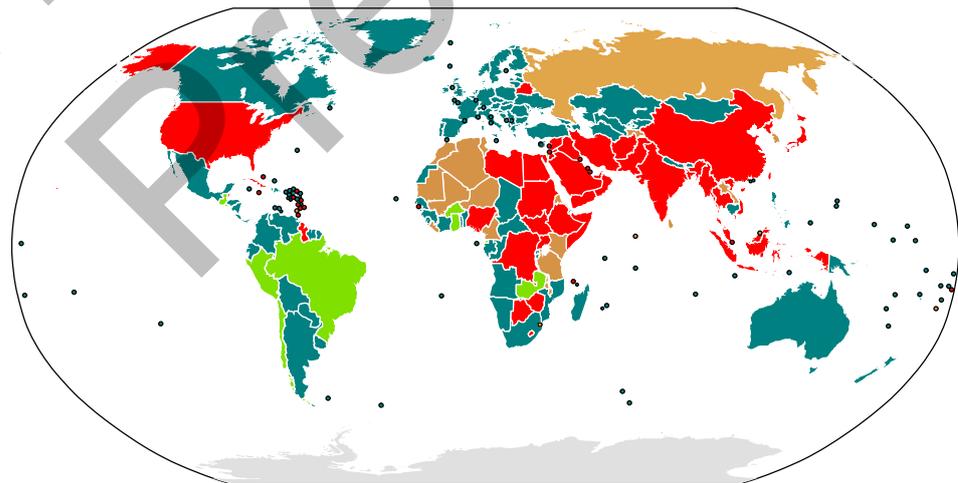
Although most countries around the world have **abolished capital punishment**, it is still a form of **punishment** in the United States, where it is a much-discussed topic, China and about 60 other countries, including many states of the Middle East.

History

The death penalty goes back a long time in history. Almost all **ancient** civilizations have used some form of killing people for a **serious** crime. In ancient Greece, many criminals were put to death, including Socrates, who was killed by a **poisonous** drink.

During the Middle Ages thousands of Europeans were **executed** because they were against the church. In **revolutionary** France 40,000 people were executed by the guillotine, a **beheading** machine.

Towards the end of the 18th **century** nations started **banning** the death penalty as a form of punishment. In the last two centuries many countries have **abolished** capital punishment completely, others use it only during war times. Many of the world's big religions have used the death penalty over the centuries.



- Active legal form of punishment for certain offenses
- Inactive legal form of punishment. No executions in the last decade; believed to have a *de facto* or *de jure* moratorium.
- Abolished except for exceptional circumstances (such as war crimes)
- Abolished for all crimes

Capital Punishment Around the World

Image: [Kamalthebest](#), [CC BY-SA 4.0](#), via Wikimedia Commons



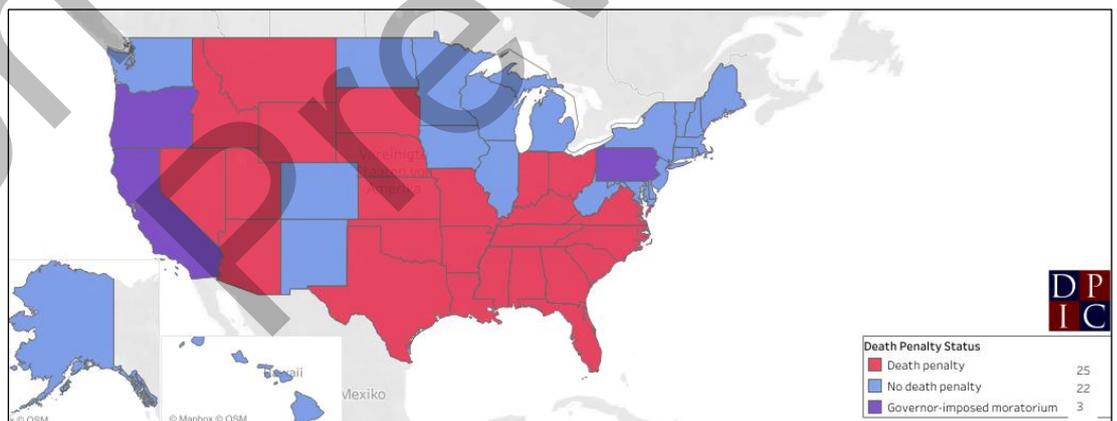
Arguments for Capital Punishment

- Humans who take the life of others do not have the right to live themselves.
- The death penalty is the **appropriate punishment** for **criminals** who have **committed** brutal crimes.
- The death penalty **serves** as a **deterrent** for **potential** criminals who might think twice before they do something **awful**.
- **Life imprisonment** is expensive and costs the state too much money.

Arguments against Capital Punishment

- Lower class **citizens** and **ethnic minorities** are **sentenced** to death more often than middle or upper classes and whites.
- The death penalty is always **immoral**. We have no right to take the lives of others, even if they have committed a serious crime.
- The death penalty is not the **appropriate** penalty for crimes other than murder. The **judicial system** makes mistakes. There have been a number of **wrongful executions** in the past. **DNA** testing can prove that an executed **inmate** was, in fact, **innocent**.
- Life imprisonment is a more **effective** way of punishing a criminal.

Death Penalty in the USA



Death Penalty by state

Image: Death Penalty Information Center

<https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/state-and-federal-info/state-by-state>

In the United States about two thirds of all the states still **exercise** the death penalty. After it had been **suspended** by the US **Supreme Court**, the highest court of the country **overturned** its **ruling** in 1976 and stated that the death penalty **corresponded** with the **constitution**. Since then, over 1300 executions have been carried out.



Although California is the state with the most **death row inmates**, Texas has carried out the most executions of all American states.

After the turn of the **millennium** some states **reviewed** their **attitude** towards capital punishment. Illinois, for example, **declared** that there would be no further executions after a series of cases had shown that some **defendants** were **wrongfully convicted** or **innocent**.

In 2005 the American Supreme Court ruled that executing a **mentally disabled** person was against the **constitution**.

Methods of execution

Hanging

Hanging was used as a main method of execution **throughout** the Middle Ages up to the beginning of the 20th **century**. It is still used in some states today. This method of execution **depends on** the length and **strength** of the rope. The **noose** is waxed or oiled so that it **slides** better. The criminal stands on a platform and falls through a **trap door**. Death comes fast if the neck **snaps** but slowly if a prisoner dies from **suffocation**.

Firing Squad

An **inmate** stands or sits in front of a wall with sandbags around him to **absorb** blood. The **firing squad** is made up of five to six shooters, one of whom gets **blank ammunition**. In most cases the prisoner is **blindfolded** before an execution.

Electric Chair

Towards the end of the 19th century **governments** looked for a more **humane** way of killing. The first **electrocution** took place in 1890 in New York. Today, the electric chair is only used in some states. An inmate is **strapped** into a wooden chair with metal clips attached to his arms and legs. A wet **sponge** is put between a shaven head and a metal plate so that **electricity** can pass better. About 500 - 2000 volts of electricity pass through the body for about half a minute, then a doctor comes to **determine** death. Electrocution results in **severe** burns of the body.



Electric chair

Image : Florida Department of Corrections/Doug Smith., Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons



Gas Chamber

In the 1920s the first prisoner was executed by gas in Nevada. It was thought to be an alternative to the electric chair. The prisoner sits in a chair while **cyanide** gas flows into an **airtight chamber**. **Eyewitnesses** have reported that death seems to be very painful as **inmates struggle** against their **fate**. The heart does not get the **oxygen** that it needs.

Lethal injection

Lethal injection is the **primary** method of killing an inmate in the United States. It was first used in 1977 in Oklahoma.

A prisoner is strapped to a **gurney** and a needle is inserted into the bloodstream. The execution takes place in three stages. First, an **anesthetic** puts them to sleep, then a solution **paralyzes** muscles and stops breathing. The third liquid is potassium chloride, a chemical that stops the heart from beating. Death comes in the form of a **heart attack**.

While doctors **proclaim** the death of an **inmate**, they are not allowed to take part in the killing, because it is **unethical**. This is done by special **wardens** of the prison.



Lethal injection

Image: CACorrections (California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation), Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Execution Methods in the Middle Ages and Ancient Times

Different forms of execution have **dominated** civilizations throughout history. Sometimes criminals were **strapped** to a wheel, where their bones and legs were broken. During the **Inquisition** of the Middle Ages the Roman Catholic Church **persecuted** many **non-believers**. **Especially** women, **convicted** as witches, were burned to death at a **stake**.

Beheading was a common form of killing in ancient times. The most popular instrument was the guillotine, which **decapitated** thousands of criminals and **innocent** civilians during the French Revolution.

In ancient times **crucifixion** was a widespread method of execution. People were nailed to the cross and died a slow and painful death. It was **practiced** until the 4th **century** AD. **Stoning** and beating were also **common** methods of execution. They are still used in some states of the Middle East and Asia.