

How does the Death Penalty affect Murder Victim Family Members?

No Justice or Healing for Victim Family Members

Families and friends living through the trauma of homicide want an outcome in the court system that is swift and sure. The death penalty provides neither. Capital punishment requires a cumbersome and lengthy process, with no guarantee that an execution will take place. In the United States, approximately 20,000 homicides are committed each year but only a small fraction of those defendants face the death penalty. Of those sentenced to death, only about 15% will actually be executed (*Death Penalty Information Center*). The final outcome in most death penalty cases – whether it is a dismissal, reduced sentence or an execution – can take decades. The loved ones of those lost must endure a long journey of recurring emotional trauma.

Cost Is a Moral Concern

The costs for the trial phase alone in a death penalty case exceed the cost to try, convict, hear appeals and house a convict in prison for 100 years. New Hampshire taxpayers bear the burden of the bloated cost of the death penalty. At the same time, few state dollars are allocated to help the family members who have lost a loved one to homicide. Family members have repeatedly testified they would be better served by financial assistance for grief support programs, counseling, or scholarships for the education of victims' children. The death penalty takes up the funds that would truly help victim family members in the aftermath of murder.

“Life without the possibility of parole keeps society safe, and it costs two to three times less to lock murderers up and house them for the remainder of their lives than it does to put them to death.”

-Bess Klassen-Landis, whose mother was murdered, testifying before the New Hampshire Legislative Study Commission on the Death Penalty

New Hampshire Cold Cases Go Unsolved

In New Hampshire, there are over 100 unsolved cold cases but no budget to pursue them. Families coping with unsolved murders have the added pain of never learning what happened to their loved ones.



Proponents of the death penalty often cite the feelings of victims' family members. For me, the best possible outcome would be to see the man who killed my daughter make a positive contribution with the life he is now to live in prison. To see him do something constructive would be to give me back a tiny piece of the goodness that lived in my daughter. There is no promise that this will happen, but an execution would guarantee it couldn't.

--Margaret Hawthorn, Mother of Molly MacDougall (murdered in Henniker NH in 2010)



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“These are arbitrary and hurtful categories of events which say to other victims that their loved one is not as important. The government should not establish hierarchies of grief.”

-Barbara Keshen, Chair of NHCADP