



# SIRS Leading Issues: *Capital Punishment*

## Step 1: Developing basic knowledge

Read the following topic overview to understand the basics of the discussion about capital punishment.

Capital punishment, or the death penalty, was first used in the United States in colonial times. After facing many legal challenges, the Supreme Court in *Furman v. Georgia* declared the death penalty unconstitutional in 1972, ruling it violated the Eighth Amendment's prohibition on cruel and unusual punishment. Four years later, the Court reversed its decision in *Gregg v. Georgia*. In recent years, the issue of capital punishment has again been taken up by the Supreme Court as justices consider the constitutionality of executing the mentally ill and juvenile offenders. Opponents to capital punishment argue it is immoral and an execution is still a killing. They also cite statistics showing that one in seven Death Row inmates is innocent. Proponents argue the death penalty serves as a deterrent to crime and claim some crimes are so heinous they deserve the ultimate punishment. Thirty-eight states currently employ some method of capital punishment including lethal injection, gas chamber, electrocution, hanging, and firing squad. Lethal injection is the most common method of execution. Over 900 executions have been carried out since 1976, with the state of Texas leading the nation.

## Step 2: Understanding differences of opinion

Read the viewpoint summaries and the related articles to understand where the points of difference on the capital punishment issue reside.

**Viewpoints Defenders** of capital punishment argue that it deters crime, saves taxpayer dollars for prison expenses and gives closure and justice to the families of victims. In "Why the Death Penalty Works," author William Tucker contends that murder rates go down when executions increase. Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney argues that the science of DNA fingerprinting may actually make capital punishment more effective in "Can You Build a Foolproof Death Penalty?" Public reaction to the Timothy McVeigh case showed strong public support for the death penalty, particularly as it applies to notorious convicts. The demographics of capital punishment support are explored in "Even for Death Penalty Foes, McVeigh Is the Exception."

**Opponents** of capital punishment argue that it is as much a murder as the crime committed by the offender, that a life sentence is a greater punishment, that capital punishment does not deter crime, that it is socioeconomically and racially biased and that innocent people are at risk. The many facets of the argument against the death penalty are explored in *Reasonable Doubts: The Growing Movement Against the Death Penalty*. Sister Helen Prejean, portrayed in the film *Dead Man Walking*, has been a high-profile opponent of the death

penalty. She presents her case in *Choose Life!* While conservatives are often outspoken supporters of the death penalty, the conservative argument against the death penalty is outlined in *The Problem with the Chair*.

## Step 3: Separating Fact from Opinion

Making reference to the appropriate articles, complete the tasks below to clarify the competing perspectives on the issue of capital punishment.

- Provide examples of people or groups supporting capital punishment
- List the reasons they support capital punishment
- Of the reasons provided, give three examples of documented facts and three examples of opinions
- Provide examples of people or groups opposed to capital punishment
- List the reasons they provide for opposing capital punishment
- Of the reasons provided, give three examples of documented facts and three examples of opinions

## Step 4: Making up your own mind

With referral to the facts and opinions you identified in Step 3, express your opinion on issues relating to capital punishment. Provide documented facts to support your opinion.

- Is capital punishment a significant deterrent to crime?
- Who benefits from the capital punishment sentences?
- Are capital punishment sentences applied appropriately? If not, what could be done to improve the system?
- If capital punishment were abolished, what would be some appropriate punishments for convicted murders and why?

## Step 5: Apply your knowledge

Using the links found within the Toolbox section of SIRS Researcher, apply what you've learned to one of the following:

- Guide to Writing a Research Paper
- Guide to Writing a Mini-Research Paper
- Guide to Creating a Powerpoint Presentation
- Guide to Creating a Debate Outline

# SIRS Researcher®

On target, on the issues



SIRS Researcher® features thousands of relevant full-text articles and analysis on today's hottest and most controversial social, scientific, health, historic, economic, political, and global issues.

**Insights into current and enduring topics** SIRS Researcher® helps students make sense of the world by offering relevant, credible articles that tell the whole story on the major issues of the day. Students can access thousands of highly-targeted documents—many accompanied by charts, maps, photos, diagrams, and illustrations—from more than 1,600 national and international sources. ■ Go in-depth into nearly 100 leading issues or explore thousands of topical issues in the areas of business, environment, family, global issues, health, human relations, institutions, and science. It's all here, enduring issues such as abortion, capital punishment, and gun control; and current issues such as doping in sports, eating disorders, and same-sex marriage.

Each SIRS Leading Issue™ contains:

- A concise introductory overview for context
- Review of the issue's main pro/con viewpoints with three related articles for each viewpoint

- My Analysis that frames the important questions on the issue
- Printable PDF for use in classroom instruction
- Hundreds of relevant full-text documents and multimedia resources on all sides of the issue, updated daily
- Sample activity templates to get students started on essays, research papers, debates, and more

In addition, you'll find a Top 10 List of users' choices on important issues at the forefront of societal discussion, and a monthly poll for students to voice an opinion.

**To learn more** Did you enjoy this sample student research guide for SIRS Researcher Leading Issues? To learn more and receive a free 30-day trial, call 800-521-0600. ■ Or, visit our website at [www.proquestk12.com](http://www.proquestk12.com). Stay up-to-date on your resources by signing up for our monthly ProQuest product bulletins at [www.proquestk12.com/news](http://www.proquestk12.com/news).

## Capital Punishment—Articles Cited

**Why the Death Penalty Works**  
American Spectator Oct. 2000

**Can You Build a Foolproof Death Penalty?**  
Christian Science Monitor Nov. 5, 2003

**Even for Death Penalty Foes, McVeigh Is the Exception**  
USA Today May 4-6, 2001

**Reasonable Doubts: The Growing Movement Against the Death Penalty**  
American Prospect Vol. 15 No. 7 July 2004

**Choose Life**  
Yes! A Journal of Positive Futures Fall 2000

**The Problem with the Chair**  
National Review June 19, 2000