



Executions Create More Victims

The impact on those who carry them out

Those who witness or participate in executions share an unlikely bond: they are at the absolute center of the death penalty. The mythology is that executions heal wounds, but studies and individual experiences suggest that executions inflict more wounds than they heal, all while creating a new set of grieving victims.

Executions traumatize corrections and government officials

- ♦ Every execution requires a team of workers who watch the inmate in his or her final days, who strap the inmate to the gurney, who insert and reinsert the needles, and who remove the inmate's body after the execution. They are the ones who deal with botched executions, who struggle with inmates fighting to stay alive, and who pull inmates away from their families when it is time for their final goodbye.
- ♦ Corrections officials, haunted by the experience of putting people to death, have committed suicide, turned to alcohol, or suffered mental and physical health problems.

"I myself was haunted by the men I was asked to execute in the name of the State of Florida. I would wake up in the middle of the night to find them lurking at the foot of my bed."

– Ron McAndrew, former warden, Florida State Prison, who presided over eight executions

In Their Words: Stories of a Broken System

"Sometimes I wonder whether people really understand what goes on down here and the effect it has on us. The executions seem to affect all of us differently...But I have no doubt that it's disturbing for all of us. You don't ever get used to it."

– Jim Willet, former warden, Huntsville, Texas, who oversaw 89 executions

"Many of us who have taken part in this process live with nightmares, especially those of us who have participated in executions that did not go smoothly. Correctional officers who carry out execution can suffer from post-traumatic stress, drug and alcohol addiction, and depression."

– Frank Thompson, retired prison superintendent who oversaw two executions in Oregon

"Those of us who have participated in executions often suffer something very much like posttraumatic stress...For me, those nights that weren't sleepless were plagued by nightmares. My mother and wife worried about me. I tried not to share with them that I was struggling, but they knew I was."

– Dr. Allen Ault, former warden and director of the Georgia Department of Corrections, who oversaw five executions

Executions traumatize clergy, jurors, and journalists

- ♦ Carol Pickett, a minister who witnessed almost 100 executions in Texas, attributed his severe health problems to the stress involved with witnessing these executions. They haunted him years after he stopped ministering to death row inmates.
- ♦ Studies have found symptoms of anxiety, nausea, and nightmares among journalists who had recently witnessed an execution.
- ♦ Jurors suffer as well. Studies have found that jurors who serve on death penalty trials are likely to endure prolonged distress as a result of determining whether someone should live or die.

"A new set of victims is created among the family members of the condemned who watch. I wondered most about the mothers who saw their sons being put to death. Some would just wail out crying. It's a sound you'll never hear any place else, an awful sound that sticks with you."

– Jim Willet, former warden, Huntsville, Texas, who oversaw 89 executions

New Victims: the Families of the Executed

- ♦ Every execution leaves a family behind – a son or daughter who doesn't understand why their parent was executed, a grieving mother who will never hear the voice of her child again. Theirs are among the hidden stories of capital punishment:

CASE IN POINT

Delores Williams was just 12 or 13 when she was raped and became pregnant. She never told her son, Wesley Eugene Baker, that he was the product of rape. By the time Baker was executed for murder 47 years later, she had already lived through an abusive relationship and lost her other son and a brother to murder. Just before Baker's execution, she told the Baltimore Sun, "I just don't want to lose Eugene....I understand the [victim's] family, the suffering they have been through," she said. "I just don't want to lose my son. I think I've had my share."

CASE IN POINT

Bill Babbitt made the hardest decision in his life when he told police he suspected his brother, Manny Babbitt, of being responsible for an attack on an elderly woman who later died of a heart attack. Manny had been suffering from post-traumatic stress symptoms ever since returning from two tours in Vietnam. The police promised Bill that Manny would receive the psychological help he needed and that he would not receive the death penalty. But in the end Manny was convicted of murder and sentenced to death. Said Bill, "Right away, Manny forgave me. My family, my brothers and sisters, they all forgave me. But I never really reconciled with my mother....I watched them kill my brother at San Quentin....I pray Manny's children will forgive me."

The death penalty's impact reaches far beyond the victim and the executed. All who cross its path shoulder the burden of participating in the death of a human being, while the system creates a whole new set of victims who are left to grieve in silence.

Sources available at ejusa.org