



Looking back or forward, the death penalty is wrong for Nebraska

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This year, African Americans in Nebraska will have an opportunity, for the first time ever, to have a direct say in whether or not we will be a state that keeps the death penalty. As this discussion takes place we should look at the facts and history of the death penalty when we decide its future.

The history of the death penalty is troubling, especially for African Americans. For years, there was nothing more than a thin distinction between lynchings and legal executions. Mobs, as well as the state, have used the ultimate punishment as a way to control black communities through fear and violence. Remnants of this disturbing history are visible in that executions are still much more likely to occur in former slave states.

As it is with so many things, while we've made some progress, our modern day capital punishment system is still one that unfairly affects the African American Community. In Nebraska, and across the nation, prosecutors have great flexibility in whether or not they seek the death penalty. The result is that the death penalty is applied in a tremendously biased manner.

In Nebraska over the last 15 years, African Americans have been charged with capital murder at a rate of 18.8 times that of whites who commit similar crimes. In those cases where death was charged, death was imposed on African Americans at a rate of 40.2 times the rate of white defendants. This disparity is not unique to Nebraska, our nation's death rows are disproportionately filled with minorities, with African Americans accounting for over 40% of the men on our death rows.

The statistics are even more troubling when one looks at the ethnicity of victims. While half of all

murder victims are African American, less than 15% of the people executed since 1976 were sentenced to death for the murder of an African American. If we keep such a biased system, and then claim the death penalty is needed for the "worst of the worst", we are sending a loud message that the deaths of African Americans matter far less than the deaths of our white brothers and sisters.



These racial inequities -- along with the facts that the punishment is far more expensive than alternatives, could put innocent lives at risk, and doesn't keep our communities any safer -- were deeply troubling to many members of our Unicameral. After careful study and deliberation with constituents, Nebraska became the latest state to walk away from our failed experiment with the death penalty when a bi-partisan super majority voted to end the death penalty.

This progress has been challenged by a ballot initiative that seeks to undo this vote of the Unicameral. However, with this challenge comes an opportunity for every Nebraskan to move our state forward with our vote. This November we will all be able to choose whether or not we retain the end of our death penalty and continue to move our state toward greater equity, fairness, and justice.

I hope my fellow Nebraskans will let history and the facts be their guide, and vote to retain the end of our death penalty. Let's keep moving forward.