

# OPINION



## The Death Penalty and the School Shooter

Why I don't want to see him executed

BY LAURA FINLEY

Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy."



I've been thinking about that quote a lot lately, and about the importance of holding positions that are particularly difficult. I live not 30 minutes from Parkland, Florida, where Nikolas Cruz murdered 17 people at Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School on Valentines Day.

Cruz left 17 others wounded and devastated not just the school but the entire community. Despite the horrors that Cruz levied, I still do not want to see him executed. I universally oppose the death penalty. That is not a particularly easy position to hold right now, in this case, but I believe it is the right one. It is for me, at least.

I oppose the death penalty for many reasons, but will highlight just a few here, briefly. First, as

much as people want to believe, no credible studies show it to be a deterrent.

Second, it costs far more than does incarcerating someone for life without parole, money that could be better used to help victims and to support violence prevention programs.

Third, it is rife with racial bias. The Death Penalty Information Center reports that 297 black defendants

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have been executed for killing a white victim while only 31 white murderers have been executed for killing black individuals (and black defendants are wrongfully convicted at a rate seven times that of white defendants).

Fourth, it is arbitrary, with death sentences varying wildly from county to county.

Fifth, we get it wrong way too often and no one can fix a wrongful execution. One hundred sixty-two

people have been exonerated from death row since 1973. Florida has exonerated 27 individuals.

Sixth, a vast majority of the people on death row have significant mental issues, and a 2014 poll showed that Americans oppose executing the mentally ill more than two to one.

But, perhaps most importantly, I reject the death penalty because it is morally repugnant. The state should simply not have the right to kill if we want to teach people that

killing is wrong.

In the case of Cruz, his attorneys have offered that he would plead guilty and accept multiple life sentences with no chance of parole in exchange for dropping the capital charges. This would ensure he cannot commit any other offenses, save taxpayer dollars, and it would spare the families of victims a long wait for a lengthy and difficult trial, followed by many years of appeals. By some

estimates, it could take 10 years for Cruz to face trial and another 20 of appeals.

I don't speak for all the victims or their families, but at least some have been on record saying they'd prefer prosecutors to accept Cruz's guilty plea so they can move on.

Just like the case of Dylan Roof, who received a death sentence for the murder of nine African-American parishioners in South Carolina in 2015, Cruz is clearly guilty and there is no racial bias given that he is Caucasian. So, some assert the system "works" in these cases. That is far from the truth.

Executing Cruz furthers a system that is desperately broken and that is, most often, not used against people like him. Death row is filled with poor, uneducated men of color and individuals who suffer from serious mental issues. Pretending that two supposedly "slam dunk" cases fixes the rot that is the death penalty is no more accurate than announcing success for saving one berry in a moldy batch.

Yes, Cruz's actions were horrendous. Yes, the community is still grieving. Adding one more body to the list of fatalities can hardly help, though.

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