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Death penalty saves lives

A New Haven Register Editorial

The debate over the death penalty isn't likely to go away in Connecticut. The state's attorney in Bridgeport said this month he will seek the death penalty if Christopher DiMeo is convicted of shooting to death two people in their Fairfield jewelry store in 2005. DiMeo is already serving a life sentence for the 2004 murder of a Long Island jeweler. The state now has eight inmates on death row.

After Connecticut executed Michael Ross, a serial killer, in 2005, the legislature had a lengthy debate in 2006 on repealing the death penalty, but decided to let it stand.

Nationally, the racial disparity among death row inmates, the high number of death sentences in a few states and publicity about wrongful convictions overturned thanks to DNA analysis have all kept alive the push against the death penalty.

In 13 states, executions have been suspended over concerns about pain and suffering caused by the means of execution, primarily lethal injection.

Largely ignored in the death penalty debate is a third generation of studies by economists showing that both a death sentence and execution have a deterrent effect.

The studies date to the 1970s, when crime data was first looked at to see if the cost of something, in this case, murder, were high enough, would people change their behavior.

The original study by Isaac Ehrlich, an economist at the University of Buffalo, concluded, after examining economic and crime data from 1933 through 1969, that each execution resulted in seven to eight fewer murders.

Others who used the same data did not find a deterrent effect. More refined studies by economists through the 1990s found contradictory results.

Since 2001, 12 studies by economists using better data and more advanced techniques have all found the death penalty is a strong deterrent, preventing from three to 18 more murders, according to a review of the studies given in 2006 testimony before Congress by Paul H. Rubin. Rubin is a professor of economics and law at Emory University.

One study looked at the impact of the 1972 through 1976 moratorium on executions following a U.S. Supreme Court ruling. It found an increase in murder rates during the moratorium and, 70 percent of the time, a drop when a state passed new death penalty legislation.

Another study by an economist at the University of Colorado not only found a deterrent effect but that commuting death sentences resulted in an increase of murders.

The new studies will attract close scrutiny from death penalty opponents who argue that execution risks the possibility of taking an innocent life. The economists' studies say there is a certainty that more innocent lives are saved by the death penalty.

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