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Factors that Influence Support for Capital Punishment among Young Americans

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Factors that Influence Support for Capital Punishment among Young Americans

by

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Chapter 1: Introduction

For decades, Americans have favorably disposed to capital punishment for convicted murderers and that support continues to accelerate. Radelet and Akers (1996) observed the increased percentage of support towards capital punishment, and had risen from 72% in 1995 to 80% in 1994. However, the polls were influenced by several factors because Americans agreed on some circumstances that deserved death as a justifiable punishment. Under the theory of "just deserts," the death penalty is legitimized by the justification that murderers should be executed based on retributive reasons; they should suffer because life imprisonment is an inadequate punishment for taking a life (Bedau, 1978; Finckenauer, 1988). Regardless of such retributions being worthy of debate, no pragmatic research has been presented with substantial evidence proving whether the argument is "correct" or "incorrect" (Radelet & Akers, 1996). Empirical research can neither justify the support towards which particular criminals deserve death penalties nor settle debates over moral concerns engulfing capital punishment.

Consequently, support of capital punishment is based on its inherent value as a general restriction where it can discourage potential murderers from engaging in criminal suicide. Politicians have applied similar school of thoughts as a deterrence rationale for quicker executions when they observe that such logic appeals to voters. Whether to utilize or ban the death penalty as a method of avoiding and discouraging homicide is an empirical subject that cannot be logically answered based on morality or political stands (Radelet & Akers, 1996). It is a subject that has subjected researchers since Edwin Sutherland to examine its rationality. According to Hochkammer (2017), both proponents and abolitionists have presented ritualistic arguments concerning the controversy. Although the arguments have been based on unsupported

facts, both groups have presented statistical data and research to justify and validate their respective positions. However, a blurry line exists between unsubstantiated perspective and facts creating confusion.

The paper gauges factors that influence the support for the death penalty among young Americans. Prior research provides that favorable perceptions of capital punishment still hold a significant majority especially in the 1980s and early '90s, but among the young American people, the support has declined (Lochinger, 2013). The study will explore updates on finding and provide in-depth insight concerning death penalty views and their association with fear for crime, demographics, and causal factors. Interviewing college students concerning their standpoint on capital punishment is imperative to the current debate on analyzing the support among young Americans. The United States future depends on college students because they have a significant influence in executing critical and informed policy decisions. Comprehending their current outlook can assist in envisaging whether capital punishment will prosper in the future era. Furthermore, it aids in investigating their perspective on crime causation. Scores of studies have concentrated on reasons that drive people towards criminal activities, but few have targeted the young people and more so, college students and then investigate the mediating effect it impacts on the attitudes toward capital punishment.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Unlike the present study that focuses on analyzing young Americans' opinions, the past research has focused on reviewing the general American population. Lochinger (2013) stated that capital punishment opinions provided by young Americans are consistent with the overall population perspective. However, to comprehend the evolution of views of capital punishment, it is best to review the 1970s literature during Greg V. Georgia (1976) along with the unexpected increase in support. In the contemporary world, young adults are exposed to different factors that influence their perspectives concerning diverse subjects and discerning what is acceptable in society. However, capital punishment has encountered diverse opinions and in some instances, education has been negatively associated with increased support for the death penalty while others lack an association between the two (Bohm, 1987; Radelet & Borg, 2000). A shift was experienced in the research papers, and most scholars were determined in understanding the characteristics of those supporting and opposing the death penalty.

Death Penalty Opinions

The 1970s experienced increased support for the death penalty. Thomas (1977) established that Americans supported capital punishment from a retributive perspective stating its equality to the offender's justice. The support argued for justifiable reasons needed to administer the death penalty rather than evaluating their stand. Ellsworth and Gross (1994) supported the data by accentuating deterrence and retribution as two principal reasons for advocating the death penalty. Bohm (1987) executed an experimental research design on college students to obtain their perspective on capital punishment. The experiment was conducted before and after the student was educated in a natural learning environment. In the end, Bohm (1987)

presented more than two-thirds of scholars supporting the death penalty and after the classes, there lacked significant change.

In the early 1990s, Ellsworth and Gross (1994) conducted an informative study about death penalties and established that young men and women have different opinions about capital punishment. It was determined that young men support death penalties compared to women, white more than people of color, and middle class than disadvantaged. Lochinger (2013) established that emotional reactions towards violent crimes determined their support on death penalty rather than depending on facts. Unnever, Cullen, and Roberts (2005) expounded on Ellsworth and Gross's notion concerning lack of facts playing a significant role in the support. The study highlighted that the majority of those that supported the death penalty held weak attitudes and this was influenced by a lack of information on operations of the death penalty system.

However, the young Americans especially the college students were investigated by Lambert, Camp, Clarke & Jiang (2011) to understand whether education influences perceptions. The study analyzed students' advocacy and knowledge about death penalty operations and after learning from various essays relating to the subject. The opinions drastically changed with expertise and there was a significant drop in the supporting rate. Vollum, Longmire and Buffington-Vollum (2004) stated that young Americans are gaining knowledge about death penalty system; thus, leading to the decreased support in the system. The decrease was influenced by the concerns expressing their low confidence in the system and implying the possibility of innocent people being executed because of a lack of adequate legal counsel.

Arguments for the Death Penalty

The opinions advocating death penalties are not factually based but somewhat ethically influenced. Capital punishment is considered as a way to discourage potential criminals from engaging in homicides (Berns, 1979). For decades, criminologists and scholars have analyzed the effect of the death penalty in fluctuating murders, but the findings have been inconclusive. However, Ehrlich (1973) established that for every death penalty executed, seven lives were saved because potential murderers were deterred from murdering.

Furthermore, contemporary studies are inconclusive because the death penalty is rarely utilized and is prolonged by the justice system. Swift and certain punishments are the appropriate deterrents. The analysis of the support for the death penalty among young Americans has proven great divides among race, political attitudes, gender and education (Jones, 2003). Regardless of the young educated Americans supporting the death penalty, they have always agreed on the risk of executing an innocent person.

Arguments against Death Penalty

Latest research performed by YouGov highlighted the skepticism projected by young Americans concerning the death penalty. Moore (2015) stated that under-30s oppose the death penalty (41%). Young Americans have perceived the death penalty as a revenge channel where innocent individuals might be executed. Furthermore, denouncing death penalty is enabled by the feeling of forgiveness and making peace with the loss. Educated young Americans have rejected the idea of life for a life; thus, capital punishment is considered a disproportionate punishment. The potential of executing wrongly accused individuals precludes capital punishment. Liebman, Fagan, West, V & Lloyd (1999) established existing errors in all capital trials; thus, the death

penalty system is unreliable. Among the young Americans, gender, victimization and perspective about the justice system shape their opinions toward the death penalty (Wu, Sun & Wu, 2011). Educated young adults reject the death penalty because of the risk of losing innocent lives; wrongful executions are preventable. Substituting the death penalty with a sentence of life without parole delivers the society needs of punishment and security without the risk of errors and irreversible punishment.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Study Design

Mixed methods were applied in asking respondents questions and observing reactions and facial expressions. Questionnaires and observations assisted in defining attitudes concerning the subject. Questions that determined levels of contentment or disappointment proved respondents' perceptions.

Study Population and Sampling

The study focused on college students from different learning institutions. Quota sampling method was applied to eighty active participants aging between 18-30 years. The quotas included first-year students, sophomores, juniors, and seniors; thus, comprising an equal number of male and female participants. The quotas accommodated different races and students majoring different majors. The diversity ensured that different opinions on the subject were gathered.

Data Collection Methods and Instruments

Open-ended questionnaires were presented to eighty participants to determine their opinions on capital punishment. During the participation, the researcher managed to observe the facial expressions of respondents when handling the matter. The face-to-face interviews were mandatory to seek clarification among participants and avoid ambiguity. The questionnaire-like templates contained all responses relating to specific questions. A consulted expert proved the reliability and validity of the data collection methods.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed manually by identifying themes and subthemes. A qualitative data analysis program was employed to perform qualitative analysis on the predictors. Microsoft Excel was used for quantitative demographic information analysis to generate charts and for fundamental descriptive analysis of the subject matter. The data gathered was critically analyzed and applied to highlight broad trends discovered.

Ethical Considerations

Each respondent was presented with a consent agreement form proving his or her active participation. The researcher ensured that respondents understood the terms and conditions applied in the study; this was to guarantee confidentiality and credibility of the study. Any participant who voiced their discomfort was excused, but fortunately, none of the respondents stated the need to drop from the study. Respondents were briefed about the research and the applied data collection methods. Furthermore, it was necessary for the researcher to seek approval from the relevant institutions before the study.

Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion

The results reported proved moderate support concerning the execution of capital punishment. Based on the questions, respondents supported the death penalty on some crimes; thus, indicating the downward trend favoring capital punishment. However, some respondents' precluded the death penalty on mentally incompetent individuals, but when mentally ill offenders were presented, college students supported their execution. The perception speculated the lack of sympathy among college students for mentally ill individuals in relation to the recent acts of homicides executed by offenders. The moderate support was influenced by political stands and religion which upholds the importance of justice and providing second chances to offenders.

The young educated Americans stated the necessity of ensuring that murderers are provided with a fair trial and life sentence was a viable punishment. The supporters of death penalty noted the need for discouraging potential murderers and effective utilization of public funds. When murderers are incarcerated, their living conditions are facilitated by taxes, which could be expended in critical funds. The capital punishment opinions and fear of crime were consistent with existing literature. The findings accentuated downward support for the death penalty as proved by recent Gallup Poll among young Americans (Jones, 2003). Support for capital punishment is naturally decreasing. It was evident race, educational level and religious status influenced death penalty opinions. White young Americans significantly supported the death penalty while religious and seniors rejected the idea of death penalty stating the risk of executing innocent individuals.

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