

Punishing the Guilty or the Innocent: An Examination of California's Death Penalty Costs

If California were a country, it would be the eighth largest economy in the world. Yet that economy has been decimated in recent years by the Great Recession. Recent figures show California's unemployment exceeds 12 percent, the second highest in the United States. This figure likely is much higher when one accounts for the under-employed and those who have given up looking for work. Even more sobering is the Census Bureau's conclusion that 16.3% of Californians had incomes below the federal poverty line in 2010. Given this dire picture, California can ill-afford to waste money. A recent, in-depth study of California death penalty costs reveals that California taxpayers have spent billions of dollars to execute only 13 inmates since capital punishment was reinstated in 1978. What is more, forecasts indicate the costs will soar to \$9 billion by 2030 when San Quentin's death row will have grown to over 1,000. When compared with inmates facing life in prison without the possibility of parole, California's death row prisoners cost millions more per year to maintain. In fact, a death penalty prosecution costs up to 20 times as much as a life-without-parole case. This paper examines the actual costs associated with California's death penalty in light of traditional arguments in favor of capital punishment. It further considers whether this scheme punishes the guilty murderers, or the innocent school children, poor, elderly, and others whose funding has been diverted to bolster California's cash-strapped economy.