

Executive Summary

California's death penalty is arbitrary, unnecessary and a waste of critical resources. While the vast majority of California counties have largely abandoned execution in favor of simply sentencing people to die in prison, 10 counties continue to aggressively sentence people to execution, accounting for nearly 85 percent of death sentences since 2000. California's death penalty has become so arbitrary that the county border, not the facts of the case, determines who is sentenced to execution and who is simply sentenced to die in prison. Pursuing executions provides no identifiable benefit to these counties but costs millions.

California's Death Penalty is Arbitrary

The 10 counties that send the most people to death row – Los Angeles, Riverside, San Bernardino, Alameda, Orange, Contra Costa, San Diego, Sacramento, Tulare, and Ventura counties – have little else in common. These 10 counties also share important qualities with the counties that rarely send people to death row. Factors such as homicide rates, population densities and voting patterns do not correlate with death sentencing. For example:

- A resident of Alameda County is nearly eight times more likely to be sentenced to death than a resident of nearby Santa Clara County, despite similar demographics;
- A person charged with murder in Tulare County is 13 times more likely to be sentenced to execution than someone in neighboring Fresno.

California's Death Penalty is Unnecessary

Seeking execution provides no benefit in terms of reduced crime or higher rates of solving crime to the counties that continue to send many people to death row. For example:

- The four counties that solve the most homicides rarely sentence people to execution;
- Only five of the 10 counties most aggressive in sentencing people to execution solved more than 50 percent of all homicides in their counties in 2005.

California's Death Penalty is a Waste of Critical Resources

As counties struggle to keep teachers and other public servants on the payroll, counties that send many people to death row are wasting resources that could be spent on other county needs. For example:

- Seven of the counties that are most aggressive in sentencing people to execution – Contra Costa, Orange, Riverside, Sacramento, San Bernardino, Tulare, Ventura – spend less per pupil on education than the statewide average;
- In three of these counties – Los Angeles, Riverside, and San Bernardino – more than 15 percent of high school students drop out before graduation.