

August 3, 2015; Death Penalty by the Numbers

The historic roots of capital punishment in America date back to the colonial period. The first recorded execution took place in 1608 when Captain George Kendall was executed by a firing squad for mutiny. At the outbreak of the Revolutionary War in 1775, all 13 colonies had the death penalty. In 1787, the newly formed United States of America established a constitution that acknowledged the death penalty.

The 5th, 8th, and 10th Amendments have all been interpreted by various courts to support capital punishment and to allow each state to decide whether or not to use the death penalty. In 1790, the First Congress passed the Punishment of Crimes Act making certain federal crimes punishable by death. The crimes included treason, counterfeiting, murder, robbery, among others. The first federal execution occurred on June 25, 1790 in Massachusetts.

M. Watt Epsy, Jr. and John Ortiz Smykla spent 32 years assembling information on the history of state-sanctioned executions in America from 1608 through 2002. To say the least, their findings are fascinating. At times they are also quite disturbing. Let's take a look at some of the statistical highlights.

Over the 394 years covered by the study, there were a total of 15,269 executions at both the state and federal levels. The racial breakdown was as follows: 50.5% Black; 43.5% White, 2.5% Hispanic; 2.5% Native American; 1% Asian.

The top five occupations of those executed were: 11.5% slaves; 3.8% general laborers; 2.4% farmhands; 2.2% farmers; and 1.1% farm laborers. Among other occupations the list includes 118 soldiers, 92 seamen, 68 pirates, 50 housewives, 31 clergy/preachers, 19 doctors, 12 attorneys, and 11 policemen.

The breakdown of the top five crimes committed is as follows: 81.8% murder; 6.7% rape; 1.9% slave revolt; 1.7% home break-in; 1.1% robberies. Other noteworthy crimes included piracy, arson, horse stealing, forgery, aiding a runaway slave, concealing a birth, and adultery.

The manner of the executions between the years 1608 through 2002 were: 61.3% hanged; 29% electrocuted; 4.1% lethal injection; 4% gas chamber; 1% firing squad; .4% burned; .1% bludgeoned on wheel; and .1% gibbeted/hanged in chains. One person was pressed between two heavy objects.

To give you an idea of how the manner of executions has changed over the years, between the years 1900 to 1999 the breakdown is: 53.6% electrocution; 33.4% hanged; 7.3% gas chamber; 5.3% lethal injection; and .4% firing squad.

Of the 15,269 people executed, the ages of 7,311 were recorded and were: 44% 20 to 29; 27.5% 30 to 39; 13.5% 40 to 49; 8% 12 to 19; 5.2% 50 to 59; .3% 70 to 79. Two individuals

between the ages of 80 to 89 were executed. Of those, 97.6% of those executed were men and 2.4% were women.

The statistical breakdown for the five states that executed the most prisoners during the 394 years is: Virginia 1,361; New York 1,130; Pennsylvania 1,043; Texas 1,031; and Georgia 976.

To indicate more current trends, between the years 1992 to 2002 the breakdown for the five states that executed the most prisoners is: Texas 238; Virginia 73; Missouri 50; Oklahoma 50; Florida 27.

The June 8th edition of *Time* ran an article on capital punishment that provides some updated information. The vast majority of states, 32, still permit capital punishment. However, from January 1, 2014 up through June 8, 2015, only five states carried out the 49 executions. The list includes Texas, Missouri, Florida, Oklahoma, and Georgia.

The process of determining guilt and executing an inmate is very slow. Of the 14 people executed between January 1, 2015 and June 8, 2015, five had been on death row from 20 to 30 years, five others from 15 to 19 years, and the remaining four for at least 10 years.

Although there are 60 inmates on federal death row, only three federal prisoners have been executed over the past 50 years. The last federal execution took place 12 years ago.

Since 1975, because of improved scientific testing, more than 150 prisoners sitting on death row have been exonerated and set free.

According to a 2014 *Time* poll, 63% of Americans continue to support the death penalty while 33% oppose it.

Next week, we'll look at the arguments in favor of capital punishment.