

Death Row Exonerated Seek End to Death Penalty in US

Difficulty:

AVERAGE

Date of release:

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Discussion activities to be done after completing this EA lesson

Today's report is about people who have been ordered to be punished by death. Why is the system not fair? Who is campaigning against this legal decision?

Extension discussion topics

A. Talking about and going over the specific topic / idea / issue in listening text

Introduction = What did we learn in the report about death row convicts? Why does this happen sometimes? What are some people trying to do and why? Does everyone agree?

1. What did we learn in the report about death row convicts generally and two in particular?
 - Up to one in eight could be innocent.
 - Poor blacks are often convicted because they couldn't afford a good defense lawyer.
 - Texas has definitely executed several (many) innocent people.
 - Ron Keine was saved from execution by only 9 days because the real murderer confessed (first to a preacher).
 - Clarence Brandley was saved because he appealed (his defense had not been good enough).
2. What organization is mentioned in the report? What are they doing and why?
 - "Witness to Innocence".
 - Its aim is to have capital punishment abolished.
 - One program involves taking exonerated prisoners on a tour of Texas cities to let people see and hear firsthand people who were wrongfully convicted.
 - The possibility of innocence is a major factor in people's opinion of the death penalty...
 - ... so they hope to convince more people to oppose the death penalty.

Do you think this program will have the desired effect?

3. What different opinions do we hear about the death penalty?
 - Death penalty is ineffective, does not deter murderers, according to Dorothy McClellan.
 - Many Americans believe that at least the death penalty ensures that murderers cannot kill anyone else.
 - It may dissuade people from committing grisly murders.
 - Others say sometimes the people executed were not the ones who committed the crime.

Which opinion do you agree with and why?

B. Expanding on (one of) the topics / ideas / issues in listening text

Topic = Capital Punishment.

1. Does your country have capital punishment? If so, for what crimes? How many people each year are executed? If not, did your country have capital punishment in the past? For what crimes? When was it abolished? Do you know of any people who were executed in your country and then found to have been innocent? What do you think of countries which still use capital punishment?
2. Think about your own attitude to capital punishment. What makes you have this opinion? Has it been affected by your parents, by television, by the press, by movies? In what way?
3. How are people executed in your country? Has this changed over the years? Which method do you think is the most humane? Why? Do you think the method of execution should depend on the crime? Why / why not?
4. Divide your study group into two and debate the topic "Capital Punishment Has a Place in Modern Society". If necessary, look at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Capital_punishment. After the debate, summarize the arguments. In your opinion which arguments were the most convincing, either for or against. Why? Did the debate make you change your previous opinions on capital punishment?

(Teacher: if you are in UK, on 28 November 2011, Channel 4 has a story on Linda Carty, a British grandmother on death row in Texas, who has always claimed she is innocent. It would be interesting to record and watch with your students and get their opinions on her innocence / guilt. Otherwise see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Linda_Carty and discuss with your students.)

C. Extending discussion of (one of) the topics / ideas / issues in listening text

Topic = Prisons.

1. What do you know about prisons in your country? How many are there? What size is the prison population in your country? Is it increasing? If so, why do think that is?
2. Is there a difference between prisons for men and those for women in your country? Do you think there should be? Are the prisons run by men or women? Do you think women's prisons should be staffed only by women? Why?
3. Prisons are very expensive to run and sometimes dangerous for the prison wardens. It is also sometimes said that minor criminals come out of prison as "hardened criminals" (*Teacher can explain term*). What do you think about these opinions?
What is your opinion on the effectiveness of prisons? What do you think about "open prisons"? About obliging prisoners to do productive work?
Do you think there could be a better solution? What could that be? Would it depend on the crime, age, sex of the criminal?
What is your opinion of community service as an alternative to prison for young offenders / minor crimes?
4. Some people think that prisoners nowadays have too "soft" a life in prison, e.g. TV, computers, games consoles, etc. What do you think? Do prisoners in your country have these facilities? If possible, do some internet research into prison conditions in various countries, first world, third world, China, etc. What differences do you note? If you had to be a prisoner, in which country would you prefer to be imprisoned? Why?

Audioscript

Ron Keine was convicted of murder in the southwestern state of New Mexico and was just days away from his scheduled execution when the man who had really committed the crime confessed to a preacher.

"And of course, the preacher says, 'Way, I can't absolve you or anything, you know, you have to go back and do the right thing.' And the guy says, 'Yeah, I know.' At that time I was nine days from execution."

After the truth came out, Keine gained his freedom and joined the effort to abolish capital punishment.

New Mexico has now abolished the death penalty. But Keine says most of the men he met on death row should remain in prison.

"And these people are dangerous killers and they should not be out on the streets. I don't want those guys out, but I don't believe in killing anybody. I believe they should be put in prison for the rest of their life* without any chance of parole."

Studies show one out of every eight condemned inmates could be innocent. And lawyers representing death penalty convicts often uncover evidence of prosecution abuses in the original trial.

Clarence Brandley was on death row here in Texas until he won such an appeal.

"It has been proven and shown over and over that Texas has executed innocent people."

Brandley says many poor black men are sent to the death row facility near Livingston, Texas, because they lacked the money to mount an effective defense.

Iranian immigrant Hooma Hedayati organized this tour of Texas cities by exonerated prisoners. He's with a group called "Witness to Innocence".

"Several studies have shown that the issue of innocence is one of the most important factors in people deciding whether they are for or against the death penalty and we believe what we (are) doing, we're putting a face to the issue of innocence, where people get firsthand to experience people that have been wrongfully convicted."

Another argument against the death penalty is that it's ineffective, says Dorothy McClellan, who teaches at Texas A & M University at Corpus Christi.

"It doesn't accomplish what it sets out to do. It seeks to get revenge, but it's inefficient, it doesn't, in fact, deter."

But many Americans believe the death penalty dissuades people from committing grisly murders, and, at the very least, guarantees they will not kill again.

Opponents try to counter that notion by showing that, in some cases, the person being executed is not the one who committed the crime.

Greg Flakus, VOA News, Corpus Christi, Texas.

* He should say: "lives".