

Race, Class and the Death Penalty in the United States

A rash of state executions have highlighted the social injustices and how they manifest within the courts and correctional institutions

By [Abayomi Azikiwe](#)

Global Research, October 17, 2024

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Law and Justice](#)

Even though the United States government praises itself for representing what is claimed to be the “leading democracy” in the world, the character of the legal and criminal justice system is largely based upon an unequal class structure and racial stratification.

Since its origins as a nation-state, the U.S. ruling interests were dependent upon the forced removals and enslavement of the oppressed Indigenous, African, Latin American and other peoples of color.

In the present century, more than 2 million people are incarcerated in local, state and federal institutions. The overwhelming majority of those detained are from the most exploited and oppressed sections of the population.

The implementation of capital punishment has its origins in the same circumstances which arose to defend the inherent unequal society within the U.S. Not all states sentence inmates to die through lethal injection or electrocution. Nonetheless, the federal death penalty, although not nearly as frequently used, remains in use.

Over the last few weeks numerous southern states have carried out the executions of men who have already been locked up for decades. In several cases exculpatory evidence examined within an impartial courtroom could have exonerated those who were put to death by prison officials.

The federal government, including the executive, legislative and judicial branches, uphold the view that these executions are occurring on a state level and therefore there is no legal basis for halting them. Nonetheless, the political impact of the rising executions in some of the southern states are being felt on a global scale. In the bourgeois democracies of Canada, Western Europe and the United Kingdom, the use of capital punishment has been banned for decades.

Although Canada and these European countries belong to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) therefore being compelled to participate in imperialist war drives in Eastern Europe, West Asia, East Asia, Africa and Latin America, they remain uncomfortable in regard to the regular usage of the death penalty by the U.S. This reality should not be surprising since as already alluded to, the U.S. has the largest per capita prison population than any other country in the world. Despite astronomically high rates of imprisonment the country is extremely violent resulting in the murders and injuries of hundreds of thousands annually.

State violence against African Americans, Latin Americans, immigrants, among others, reinforce the status quo. Since the beginning of the 21st century, thousands of oppressed, working class and poor people have been abused, injured, framed and murdered by law-enforcement agents.

The experience of this century is a continuation of a pattern which emerged under British colonialism in the 17th century. With the independence of the thirteen colonies after the War of 1776-1783, African enslavement and the policy of racially oriented removals remained the mainstay of the Republic up until the Civil War of 1861-1865. The emancipation of four million people of African descent during 1865 ushered in an attempt to reconstruct the U.S. on a more democratic framework. This project was abandoned after the national elections of 1876 resulting in the reinstatement of near slave-like conditions for African Americans.

Mass lynching as a mechanism for social control had its judicial component within the criminal justice system. The penal institutions were utilized for the exploitation of labor which was perfectly legal under the 13th Amendment stating that involuntary servitude was prohibited by the Constitution only apart from the imprisonment of people. The enforcement of laws in the U.S. were designed to gain maximum profits for the capitalist ruling class.

During the post-civil rights era beginning in the 1980s, the U.S. experienced rapid growth in police agencies, law-enforcement tactics utilized against the oppressed population groups and the incarceration of people of color and the working poor. Over a period of three decades, the number of people imprisoned grew by 400 percent.

Racism, State Executions and the Class Character of the U.S. Today

It is necessary to place the present series of executions within a historical context to fully grasp the class character of U.S. society. At the height of the African American movement for equality and self-determination during the early 1970s, the death penalty was suspended by the U.S. Supreme Court between 1972-1976.

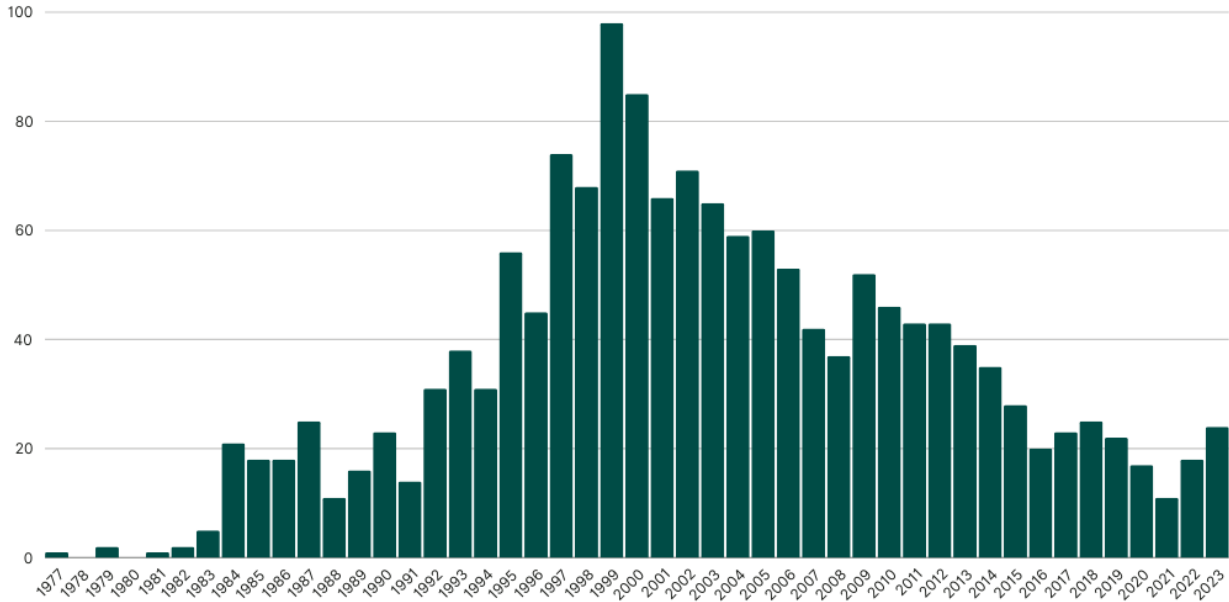
Over the last five decades there have been many executions. Sean Murphy [wrote for the Associated Press](#) on September 26:

“Death row inmates in five states have been put to death in the span of one week, an unusually high number of executions that defies a yearslong trend of decline in both the use and support of the death penalty in the U.S. The first execution was carried out on Friday in South Carolina. Two more death row inmates, in Missouri and Texas, were pronounced dead Tuesday evening following executions, and an Oklahoma inmate was executed Thursday. When Alabama used nitrogen gas later Thursday to execute a man, it marked the first time in more than 20 years — since July 2003 — that five were held in seven days, according to the nonprofit Death Penalty Information Center, which takes no position on capital punishment but has criticized the way states carry out executions. The United States has reached 1,600 executions since the death penalty was reinstated by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1976, said Robin Maher, the center’s executive director.”

Delays in executions in recent years are attributed to controversy surrounding the methods used to put inmates to death. Lethal injections often run into difficulties and failures requiring postponements. The lack of availability of preferred substances inducing sudden

death has been one cause for the gaps between executions. See [this](#).

The Number of People Executed in the U.S. Each Year 1977-2023



Source: NAACP Legal Defense Fund Data, Criminal Defense Team Analysis

Death penalty map in the United States

In Alabama recently, nitrogen gas was used to execute Alan Eugene Miller, 59, a white man. Perhaps the most widely known execution in the recent period was that of African American Marcellus Williams, 55, of Missouri, who maintained his innocence for many years. As the execution date neared, Williams changed his plea to no contest, yet it was not enough to stave off his ordered death by lethal injection.

Image: Marcellus Williams executed by the State of Missouri



Many questions were raised about the errors in the murder case against Williams. However, the State Supreme Court ruled against him as **Governor Mike Parsons** rejected a clemency request from Williams sealing his fate.

Death Penalty in the U.S. Can Never be Considered Justifiable

Due to the racial and class history of the U.S., the implementation of the death penalty can never be justified on political and moral grounds. Irrespective of the crimes these inmates were sentenced for by the courts, the level of injustice embedded in the judicial system is a clear reflection of the power dynamics within society as a whole.

Elements within the ruling class have committed far greater crimes against people inside the U.S. and abroad while never facing prosecution let alone capital punishment. Just within the last sixty years, wars of occupation, forced removals and genocide have and are still occurring. Those who have systematically denied the rights of millions to due process and to live a decent life free of impoverishment, racial profiling and all forms of oppression and exploitation can by no means sit in judgment against anyone from the working class and poor.

Those who are utilizing street crime as a rationale for mass incarceration of the largely Black, Brown and poor masses should be more concerned about the abolition of inequality and national oppression rather than seeking to impose social control. The death penalty is the ultimate and final level of state punishment. Therefore, in a racist capitalist system its implementation must be analyzed within the framework of the actual history of the U.S.

The abolition of capital punishment and the entire prison-industrial complex is an integral part of the struggle to overturn the unjust system. A rethinking of the death penalty over recent decades must create the atmosphere for the organizational and mobilizing of social forces aimed at realizing the fundamental change needed to bring into being a truly democratic society.

*

Click the share button below to email/forward this article to your friends and colleagues. Follow us on [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#) and subscribe to our [Telegram Channel](#). Feel free to repost and share widely Global Research articles.

[Birds Not Bombs: Let's Fight for a World of Peace, Not War](#)

Abayomi Azikiwe is the editor of the Pan-African News Wire. He is a regular contributor to Global Research.

All images in this article are from the author

The original source of this article is Global Research
Copyright © [Abayomi Azikiwe](#), Global Research, 2024

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

Become a Member of Global Research

Articles by: **Abayomi**
Azikiwe

Disclaimer: The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: publications@globalresearch.ca

www.globalresearch.ca contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: publications@globalresearch.ca