

# Racism and the Death Penalty

New study links mass incarceration, lethal police force and capital punishment

By [Abayomi Azikiwe](#)

Global Research, October 08, 2020

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Law and Justice](#), [Police State & Civil Rights](#), [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

**Christopher Vialva**, 40, was executed by the United States government on September 24 in Terra Haute, Indiana.

*Vialva was the first Black person put to death by the federal criminal justice system since the resumption of executions by Washington earlier this year.*

The now deceased Vialva committed his crimes in the state of Texas as a youth. His offenses were designated as a federal crime due to the fact that it took place in an area considered under the control of the Fort Hood military base. Vialva's mother, Lisa Brown, who is Caucasian, pleaded with President Donald Trump to commute the death sentence of her son, to no avail.

Six others faced the same fate in rapid succession during 2020. These events, overshadowed by the presidential elections, the COVID-19 pandemic and widespread mass demonstrations and rebellions fueled by racism and national oppression, represents the continuing unjust treatment of people of color communities, working and poor people in the most advanced capitalist state in the world.

The death penalty was reinstated in 1976 after being suspended for four years. Nonetheless, only three federal executions were carried out between 1976 and the beginning of 2020, after a 17 year hiatus.

The escalation in federal executions is a direct result of the policies of the administration of President Donald Trump. Attorney General William Barr was instrumental in facilitating the renewal of capital punishment on a federal level.

Even within the state criminal justice systems in the many areas where the death penalty remains legal there has been a notable decline in the utilization of this outmoded and barbaric form of punishment. However, the current administration in Washington is seeking to illustrate that it is committed to the maximum sentencing of prison inmates despite its claims of prison reform directed towards African Americans. Barr was quoted as saying "we owe it to the victims and their families to carry forward the sentence imposed by our justice system." (See [this](#))

## Racism, National Oppression and the Death Penalty

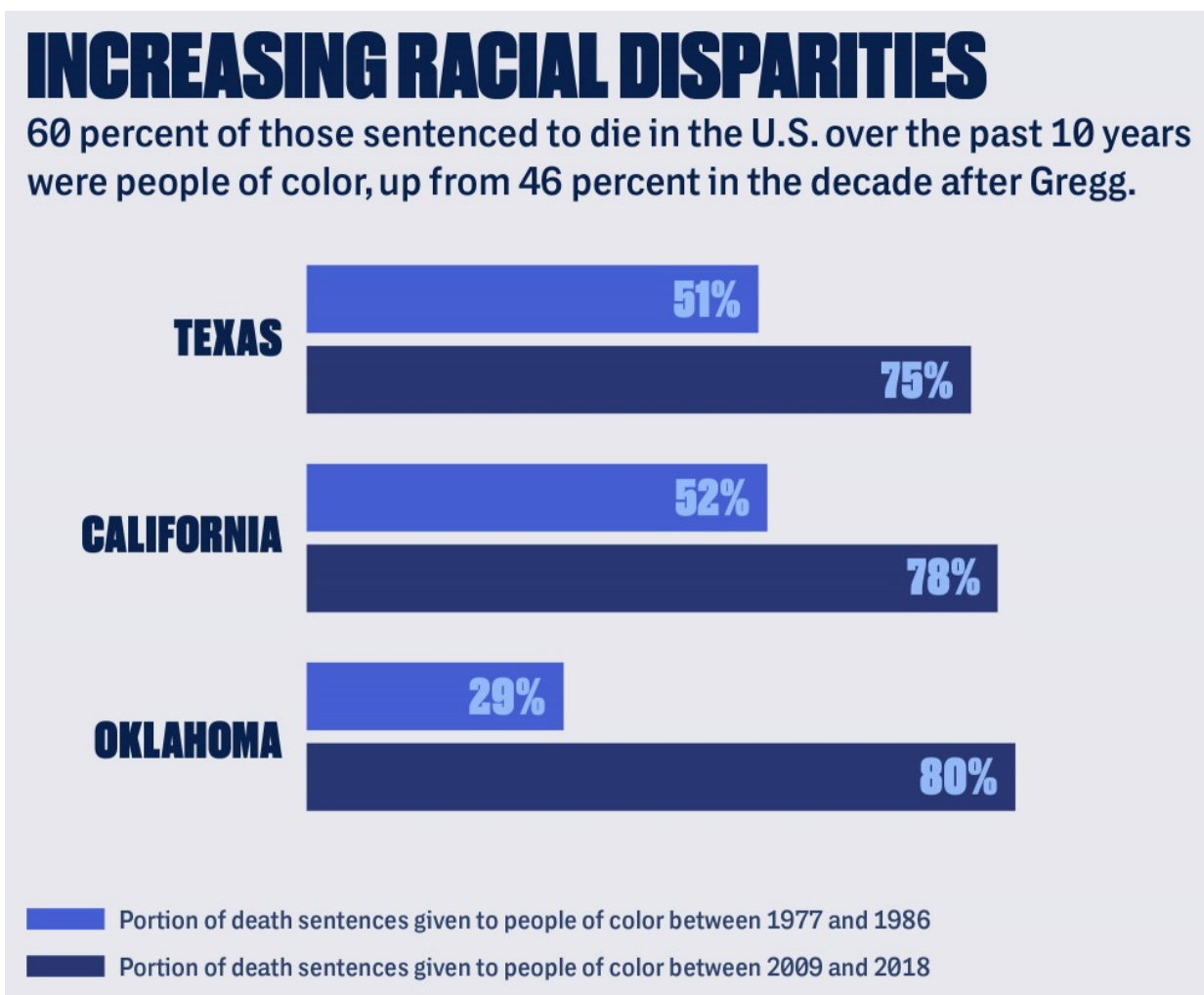
A recent study released by the Death Penalty Information Center (DPIC) further exposes the link between race and criminal justice. The study comes at a critical juncture in the U.S. when millions have demonstrated and spoken out against the arbitrary use of lethal force

involving police and vigilante contacts with African Americans and people of Latin American descent.

The recrudescence of federal capital punishment is a ruthless by-product of the ideological racism of the current administration. Trump built his 2016 presidential campaign through the targeting and denigration of immigrant workers, African Americans, women and other oppressed groups. Yet this stiffening of overt national discrimination and bigotry has prompted widespread opposition both domestically and internationally.

This report by the DPIC was issued prior to the November 3 national elections. The findings reinforce the narratives related to the expanding prison-industrial-complex which is inextricably linked to the disproportionate profiling, arrest, sentencing, imprisonment and execution of oppressed people in comparison to whites in the U.S.

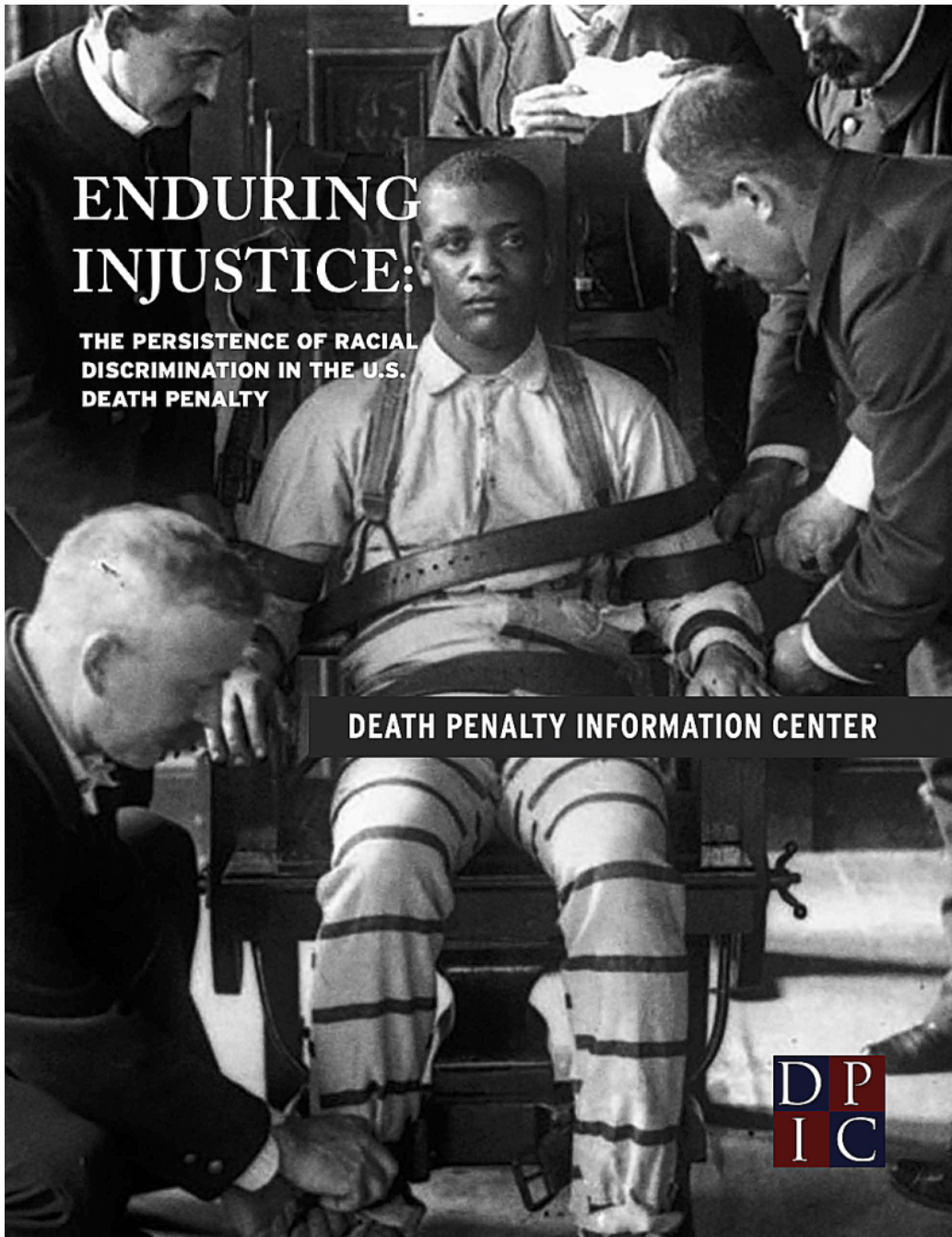
DPIC entitled its study “Enduring Injustice: the Persistence of Racial Discrimination in the U.S. Death Penalty”. The research report looks at the application of the death penalty historically and draws striking parallels to event taking place in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.



Death Penalty and Race graph

According to Ngozi Ndulue, lead author and Senior Director of Research and Special Projects for DPIC:

“The death penalty has been used to enforce racial hierarchies throughout United States history, beginning with the colonial period and continuing to this day. Its discriminatory presence as the apex punishment in the American legal system legitimizes all other harsh and discriminatory punishments. That is why the death penalty must be part of any discussion of police reform, prosecutorial accountability, reversing mass incarceration, and the criminal legal system as a whole.” (See [this](#))



DPIC study cover on Enduring Injustice

In the U.S. in 2020, there are approximately 2.3 million people incarcerated in numerous jails, juvenile detention centers and prisons. Millions more are under some form of judicial and law-enforcement supervision. African Americans and other people of color make up over half of all those locked up while these communities constitute less than 40% of the overall population of the U.S. combined.

The Executive Director of DPIC and the editor of the report, **Robert Dunham**, said of the

study that:

“If you don’t understand the history — that the modern death penalty is the direct descendant of slavery, lynching, and Jim Crow-segregation — you won’t understand why. With the continuing police and white vigilante killings of Black citizens, it is even more important now to focus attention on the outsized role the death penalty plays as an agent and validator of racial discrimination. What is broken or intentionally discriminatory in the criminal legal system is visibly worse in death-penalty cases. Exposing how the system discriminates in capital cases can shine an important light on law enforcement and judicial practices in vital need of abolition, restructuring, or reform.”

### **Movements Aimed at Prison Abolition and National Liberation Are Needed Today**

Consequently, the system of national oppression and institutionalized racism in criminal justice requires consistent work and political struggle. Those incarcerated and targeted by the correctional system are also the victims of super-exploitation.

Many prisoners and those threatened with imprisonment are forced to work under slave-like conditions. In California, inmates are being utilized to fight forest fires which are a direct outcome of the failure of the capitalist and imperialist system to place adequate focus on the environmental impact of climate change.

Other inmates are brutalized by guards and administrators, many of whom are racists. The prison system is both public and private. There has been a dramatic increase in the proliferation of private correctional facilities. Migrant workers in greater numbers are being imprisoned, including children. Recent reports indicate that these inmates are being molested by guards and subjected to unwanted medical procedures related to their reproductive health.

Mass incarceration and the death penalty are also forms of social containment. Millions over the last four decades have been removed from society away from families, neighborhoods and workplaces. Therefore, the growth in the prison industry has contributed immensely to the destruction of Black, Brown and working class families.

The new DPIC report points to the insidious character of the federal executions by noting that the renewed process of capital punishment was begun with six white death row inmates. Nevertheless, the report states emphatically:

“Although the first set of executions scheduled by the federal government in 2020 have been strategically directed at white people, the federal death penalty has long been plagued by the same racial bias present in state death penalty systems. Thirty-four of the 57 people currently on federal death row are people of color, including 26 Black men. Some were convicted and condemned by all-white juries. In an action widely regarded as an assault on Native sovereignty, the sole Native American on federal death row was executed for an offense on tribal lands over the repeated objection of his tribe and Native American leaders across the country.”

Any analysis related to the emancipation from national and class oppression must include a critique of the criminal justice structures in the U.S. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, a large-scale movement among prisoners themselves surfaced leading to protests, strikes,

rebellions and the takeover of correctional institutions.

In 1971, thousands of inmates at the Attica State Prison in New York seized the facility and made militant demands on the warden and then Governor Nelson Rockefeller. Instead of negotiating in good faith with the African American-led insurrection, Rockefeller ordered the state police to retake the prison, afterwards killing dozens of inmates and most of the guards held by the prisoners.

Since the early 1970s, periodic eruptions of resistance have occurred in the prison system. These efforts include petitioning for better treatment, hunger strikes and work stoppages which demand an end to brutality and harassment. These actions are occurring in California, Georgia, Michigan, among other states.

These struggles inside the prison system are part and parcel of the movement to end racism, national and class oppression. With no end in sight of the prison-industrial-complex under capitalism, only the building of a socialist society can guarantee equal protection under the law.

\*

Note to readers: please click the share buttons above or below. Forward this article to your email lists. Crosspost on your blog site, internet forums. etc.

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

*All images in this article are from the author; featured image: Christopher Vialva and his mother Lisa Brown just days before his execution in Indiana*

The original source of this article is Global Research  
Copyright © [Abayomi Azikiwe](#), Global Research, 2020

---

[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](mailto:publications@globalresearch.ca)

[www.globalresearch.ca](http://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](mailto:publications@globalresearch.ca)