

# 5 facts about the death penalty

By [David Masci](#)

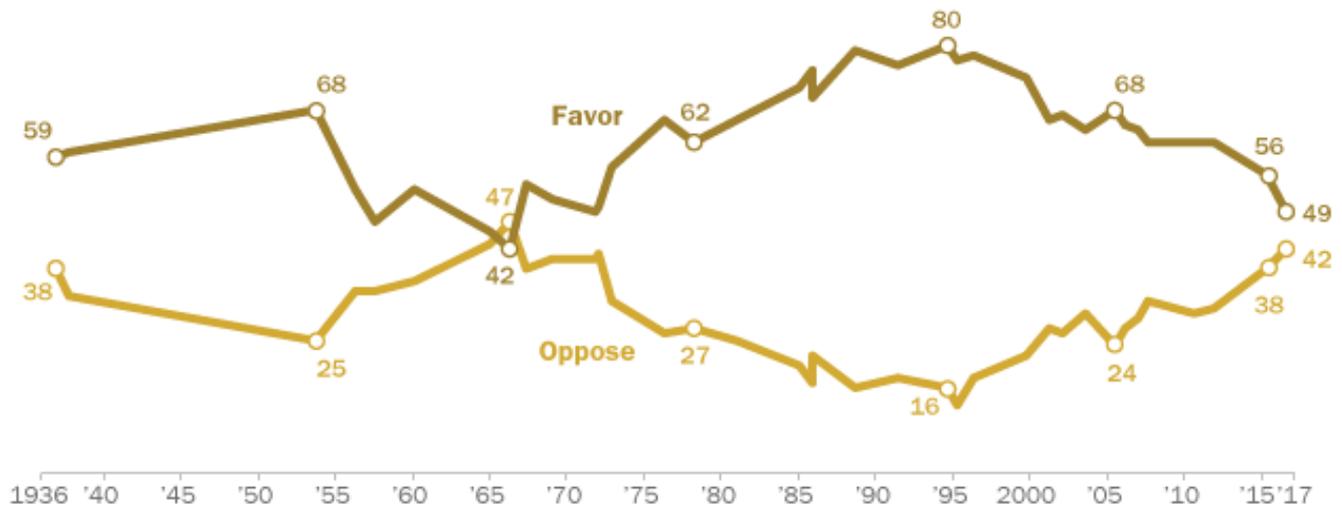
Even though nationwide support for the death penalty has fallen sharply in recent years, voters in three states voted in support of capital punishment in 2016. In [Nebraska](#), a referendum to reverse an earlier state legislative ban on the death penalty won approval handily. In [Oklahoma](#), where the death penalty was already legal, voters approved a state constitutional amendment guaranteeing the availability of capital punishment “unless prohibited by the United States Constitution.” And in [California](#), which has more inmates on death row than any other state, voters rejected an initiative that would have abolished the death penalty and [appear to have approved](#) another that will limit the appeals process for inmates sentenced to death.

Approval of these measures comes as the U.S. is on track to record its [fewest executions](#) in a quarter century. At the same time, [31 states](#) (once again including Nebraska) still have the death penalty on the books, as does the federal government. Here are five facts about the issue:

**1 Support has fallen dramatically in the past two decades, but more Americans still favor the death penalty than oppose it.** A Pew Research Center poll in August and September found that 49% favor the death penalty for people convicted of murder, while 42% oppose it. But support is at its [lowest level in more than 40 years](#). Much of the decline in support over the past two decades has come from Democrats. Currently, just 34% of Democrats favor the death penalty, compared with 72% of Republicans.

## Support for death penalty continues to fall

% who \_\_\_ the death penalty for persons convicted of murder



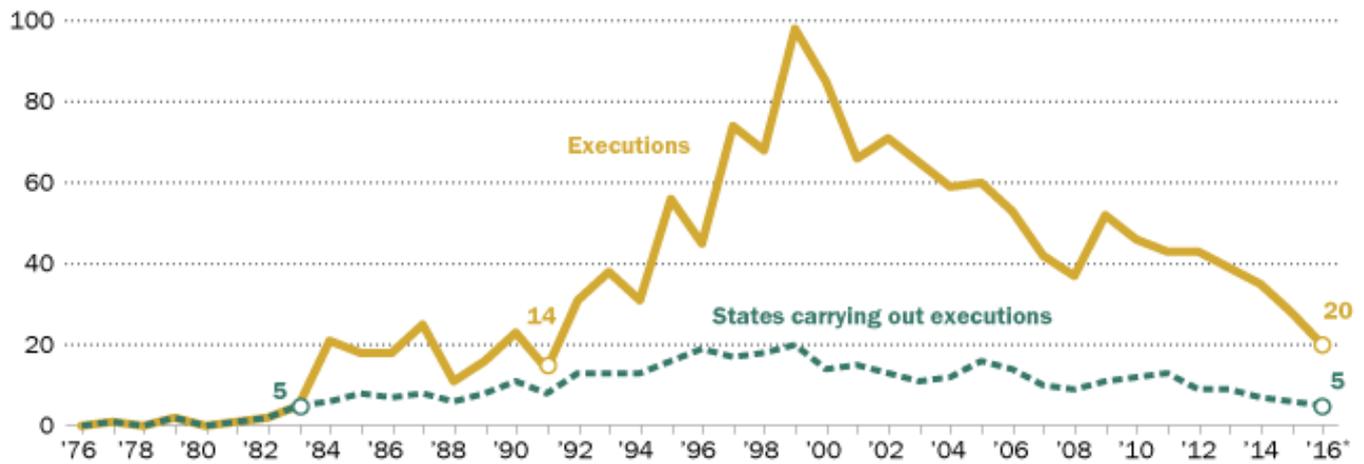
Notes: Don't know responses not shown. 1935-1995 data from Gallup.

Source: Survey conducted Aug. 23-Sept. 2, 2016.

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**2**Death row executions peaked in 1999 and have fallen sharply in the years since. So far in 2016, [17 inmates](#) have been executed, according to the Death Penalty Information Center. Since only three other inmates are [scheduled](#) to be put to death this year, the final tally of executions is expected to be [the lowest since 1991](#), when 14 people were executed. This year, just five states – Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Missouri and Texas – accounted for all executions, compared with 20 states in 1999.

## U.S. executions at lowest level in 25 years



Notes: 2016 figures are projections. The federal government carried out two executions in 2001 and one in 2003.  
Source: Pew Research Center analysis of data from Death Penalty Information Center

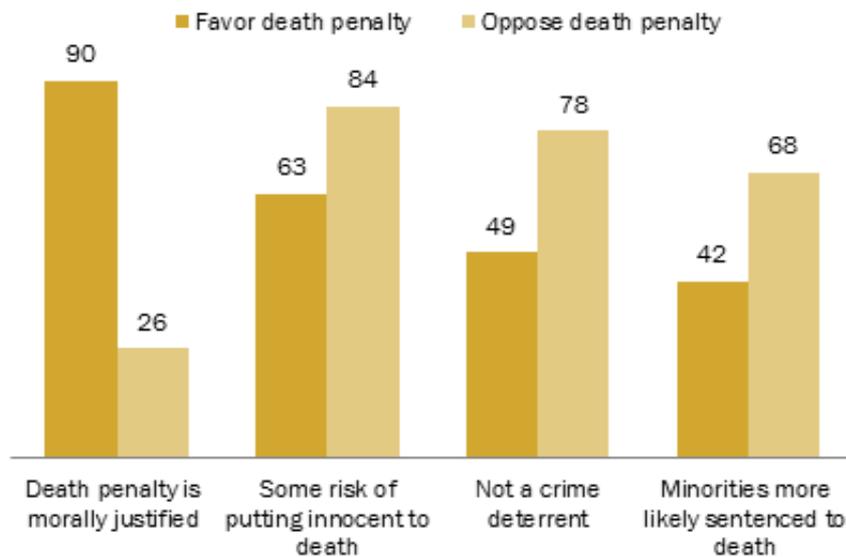
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**3** While the number of executions has dropped in the U.S., use of capital punishment internationally increased by 54% in 2015, according to [Amnesty International](#), a human rights organization that opposes the practice. The organization says that in 2015, at least 1,634 inmates were put to death in 25 nations, with just three countries – Iran, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia – accounting for 89% of all recorded executions. Iran executed the most people (at least 977), largely for drug-related offenses. Second and third on the list were Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, which conducted 326 and 158 executions, respectively. The international total does not include figures from China, which does not publish information about its use of capital punishment but may well carry out more executions than all other countries combined. Indeed, the Cornell University Law School [estimates](#) that the Chinese executed 2,400 people in 2015.

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## How Death Penalty Supporters and Opponents View Its Morality, Fairness and Effectiveness

*Among those who favor/oppose the death penalty, % who say...*



Survey conducted March 25-29, 2015.

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**Americans harbor doubts about how the death penalty is applied and whether it deters serious crime.** In a Pew Research Center [survey](#) from 2015, about six-in-ten adults said the death penalty does not deter people from committing serious crimes. About half also said that minorities are more likely than whites to be sentenced to death for similar crimes, compared with 41% who said a death sentence is equally likely for whites and minorities. About seven-in-ten adults (71%) said there is a risk that an innocent person will be put to death, including 84% of those who oppose the death penalty. Even a majority of death penalty supporters (63%) said there's a risk of taking an innocent life.

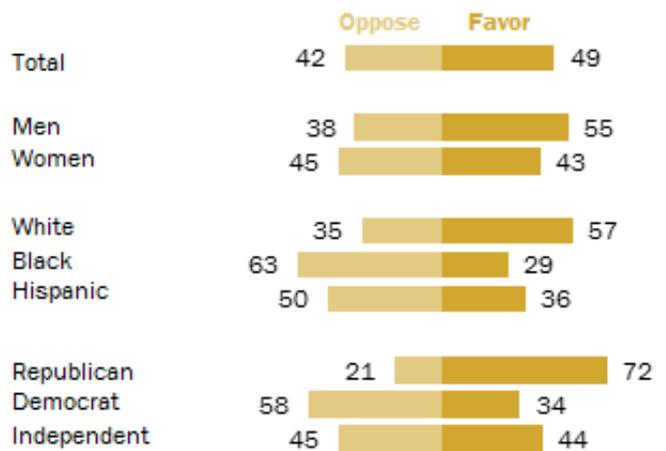
**5There are racial and gender divides in opinions on the death penalty in the U.S.** A majority of whites (57%) favor the death penalty, compared with 29% of blacks and 36% of Hispanics, according to Pew Research Center [survey data](#) from 2016. Also, men are more likely to favor capital punishment (55%) than women (43%).

*Note: This is an update to a post published May 28, 2015, written by Sara Kehaulani Goo, then a senior digital editor at Pew Research Center.*

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## Gender, racial and partisan gaps remain in views of death penalty

*% who \_\_\_\_\_ the death penalty for persons convicted of murder*



Note: Whites and blacks include only those who are not Hispanic; Hispanics are of any race. Don't know responses not shown.  
Source: Survey conducted Aug. 23-Sept. 2, 2016.

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Topics: [Criminal Justice](#), [Death Penalty](#), [Religion and U.S. Politics](#)