

## Persuasive Essay: Dealing with Victims' Families

Death is an unavoidable and irreversible event, which happens naturally. However, as a way of punishment, it is completely different by its nature. While a murder based on a malicious intention is viewed as evil in its pure form, killing a person for the sake of rightful revenge is one of the most ardently debatable issues. A death penalty is the most horrendous instance of people playing God presumably for a good reason. It will be discussed through the prism of Helen Prejean's ideas in the book *Dead Man Walking*, as well as thoughts and considerations of families involved in the debate. Therefore, considering the whole idea of capital punishment and its impact on both families of victims and death row inmates' relatives, it is necessary to provide possible assistance to them by support groups.

Firstly, the death penalty has become justified pain infliction that does not help victims' families to get closure. In most cases, healing does not depend on what happens to the perpetrator. Lloyd LeBlanc and Vernon Harvey, whose suffering is described by Helen Prejean in *Dead Man Walking*, may illustrate how differently people try to cope with the death of a child and reach some closure. Devastated by the loss of his beloved stepdaughter, Mr. Harvey believes that every victim has the right to see the murderer executed. His rage does not subside even in years after the tragedy. The fact that he is advocating for the rights of people who have lost children like in his case makes him keep going and becomes the essence of his existence (Prejean 192). Clearly, the execution of Robert Willie, the murderer of Faith, did not bring him what he expected, namely, the end of internal torments. In his turn, Mr. LeBlanc was initially a strong advocate of the death penalty as well, but he managed to forgive, but not to forget. The man whose son was brutally murdered has realized that feeling anger towards the perpetrator only causes more grief. He even told Helen Prejean that he had forgiven the murderer and did not owe him a grudge (223). It will never be known for sure whether Lloyd LeBlanc and Vernon Harvey find some closure, but the death of the murderers of their children has not made them any happier.

Secondly, the death penalty performed over the perpetrator only creates a vicious circle of anger and violence that may only lead to more suffering and deaths, but not closure. The book *Dead Man Walking* describes two murderers not accidentally. The fact that Robert Willie killed in a similar way after Elmo Patrick Sonnier had been executed serves as a proof of the fact that murders will continue and the death penalty will not stop them in any way. Moreover, families of murderers may accumulate anger towards the justice system to such an extent that they may kill as well. It is worthwhile mentioning the mother of the two Sonnier brothers convicted. Although her children had committed a horrendous crime, she still loved them unconditionally (Prejean 78). Therefore, when one of them was executed by the government justice system, her immeasurable pain was even hard to imagine. Even in the Bible, the loss of a firstborn son was the worst plague of Egypt (Sharp 56). A woman in such a desperate and enraged state is capable of everything. This situation serves as another example of how the death penalty does more evil than good. It healed neither LeBlanc nor Harvey and ruined the life of Mrs. Sonnier. The fact that the former, the father of Sonnier's victim, visited the latter may be interpreted in different ways (Prejean 89). He may have wanted to apologize and to explain his fervent support of her son's execution. However, Mr. LeBlanc may have also wanted to share his grief and to see how other parents who had lost the offspring were dealing with this tragedy. The inappropriateness of the situation lies in the fact that he himself is an indirect murderer of her son, and this fact is difficult to forgive. Therefore, the death penalty in this and many other cases is not to be viewed as a solution to suffering, but as a cause of more misery and a murder. Some closure can be found by forgiveness and praying, but most certainly not by murdering others.

Next, wealth disparity should be noted when condemning people to the death penalty. The disturbing tendency that may be observed points to the fact that the majority of inmates executed are guilty of killing white people (Death Penalty Information Center). Race disparity in capital punishment can be proven by statistics: 75% of homicide victims in cases resulting in death penalty were white. Moreover, Southern states like Texas, Alabama and

Louisiana have the highest quantity of death row inmates (Death Penalty Information Center). The book *Dead Man Walking* serves as another proof of the fact that the death penalty is mostly imposed on poor people. Both Elmo Patrick Sonnier and Robert Willie were part of the underprivileged society sector (Prejean 176). The fact that they did not have money put them at disadvantage, because in the course of a trial, people who have better lawyers may have higher chances of winning the case. Appeal's success also largely depends on the attorney, and in the cases of Sonnier and Willie, it did not bring any positive results (Prejean 180).

Finally, the existence of such option as a death penalty creates more victims than lives saved. As Prejean points it out, even if people discard the suffering of doomed inmates, who "have died a thousand times already" and "are suffering from their anticipation of the final horror", there are still families of murderers to consider (43). If to compare and contrast relatives of the killer and the victim, one similarity may be detected. They both suffered a significant and irreplaceable loss (Sharp 78). Families of death row inmates may also view themselves as homicide victims, albeit of a different sort of a murder. While relatives of the victim experienced shock and excruciating pain because of a sudden death of their loved one, the family of the murderer is in constant pain because of lethal injection anticipation. They live over a continuous cycle of hope and despair because of situation's uncertainty (Sharp 79). In her book *Dead Man Walking*, Prejean advocates for banning the death penalty because she considers the human life too precious, and even the worst actions committed by a person do not allow to murder him or her (65). Support group, which she has established under the name "Survive," helps all victims' families to get over hatred and anger caused by the murder of family members (Prejean 201). Society should support victims' and murderers' families because they have both suffered a loss.

On the other hand, the advocates of the death penalty state that this sort of punishment serves as a deterrent of crime. According to the statistics, one executed death row inmate can deter seven potential murderers (Walker 67). What statistics fails to provide is the

information on how many people become killers in order to follow the footsteps of the executed perpetrators, or how many relatives of the executed commit a suicide or homicide because of depression and rage from which they suffer. According to the statistics, 80% of executions happen in the Southern states. Surprisingly, the highest murder rate is also detected in the same region (Death Penalty Information Center). Such a tendency points to the fact that executions do not perform their primary function: they do not deter potential offenders from committing violent crimes.

In conclusion, the death penalty still exists because criminals are turned into monsters in the imagination of an average person. However, all people have to realize that by executing others, even for a horrendous crime, they become barbarian beasts as well. Helen Prejean's book serves as a perfect illustration of how the death penalty does not only ruin lives of criminals, but also of their relatives. Executions do not bring any closure to victims' families, but creating support groups has proven to be an effective method of coping with the issue.