Pre-Reading Warm Up Questions

1. Does your country have the death penalty?
2. How many countries do you think use the death penalty?
3. What are the arguments against the death penalty?
4. What are the arguments for the death penalty?
5. How are criminals typically treated in prisons?

The Death Penalty

The death penalty, also called capital punishment, refers to the killing or execution of a person as punishment for a crime. Half of the countries in the world have abolished this form of punishment. About 30% of the countries in the world still use it as punishment for crimes such as murder and treason. Each year, a few more countries abolish the death penalty.

Capital punishment is used in 34 of the 50 states in the US. Does the word “capital” seem odd? This term comes from the Latin word for head. Long ago, capital punishment referred to cutting off a person’s head. In America, execution is now carried out by lethal injection. While this method of killing is not as disturbing to watch, autopsies show that the injections are not always quick and painless. The procedure sometimes goes wrong, and the injections cause severe pain. Medical professionals are often required to assist in the executions. The UN has asked that all countries refrain from using this cruel and unusual form of punishment.

Many opposed to the death penalty say that death row is a form of torture. Death row is a section of a prison for those sentenced to death. Some inmates spend years waiting for their execution date. This happened to Manuel Valle, a Floridian man who killed a police officer. He spent 33 years on death row before being executed. How does death row differ from regular prison life? In some cases, prisoners spend their days in solitary confinement. They are not allowed to worship, exercise, or take part in group activities.

Amnesty International calls the death penalty the “ultimate denial of human rights”. In 2011, this human rights group defended an American prisoner named Troy Davis. Davis was convicted of killing a police officer, but many doubted the evidence. The executive director called this case a “catastrophic failure of the justice system.” Troy Davis maintained his innocence until the moment he died. 1000 people attended his funeral.

Statistics show that minorities are more likely to face capital punishment. Americans who murder a white male are at least three times more likely to be executed than those who kill a black male. In addition, those who can’t afford a good lawyer are more likely to face the death penalty. Studies also show that capital punishment does not deter criminals. Would you believe that a death penalty sentence costs tax payers more than a sentence of life imprisonment? Some people think the death penalty is a less severe sentence than life in prison with no chance of parole.

COMPREHENSION  

1. What is another word for the death penalty and why does it have this name?
2. What percentage of countries have abolished the death penalty?
3. What do autopsies of previous death row inmates sometimes show?
4. How does Amnesty International feel about the death penalty?
5. Why are poor criminals more likely to face the death penalty?
VOCABULARY REVIEW

A. Match the words on the left with the correct meaning on the right.

1. capital punishment a. discontinued
2. abolished    b. the purposeful administration of a drug that kills
3. treason      c. a crime of betrayal against a country or its leaders
4. lethal injection d. prison area for people who have been sentenced to death
5. autopsy      e. a form of cruel punishment that causes severe pain
6. death row   f. the death penalty
7. torture      g. a medical procedure to determine exactly how a person died
8. solitary confinement h. a chance to be free from jail based on good behavior
9. convicted    i. punishment preventing prisoners from interacting with others
10. catastrophic j. to help prevent someone from doing something
11. deter       k. causing great damage
12. parole      l. found to be guilty of a crime

B. Choose the right word(s) from the left column above to complete the following sentences.

1. The murderer was sentenced to death and will now wait on _____________________.
2. The ________________________ showed that the lethal injection caused the heart to stop beating.
3. Burning someone in exchange for a guilty plea is a form of _____________________ used in some prisons.
4. Statistics show that capital punishment does not _______________ murderers .
5. The man was on ___________________ for good behavior when he killed his neighbor.

DISCUSS IT

Work with a partner or in small groups. Discuss the following questions.

1. Is capital punishment a fair punishment for murder?
2. How do prosecutors prove that a person is guilty “beyond a reasonable doubt”?
3. Do you know of any cases where a person “did time” for a crime he or she did not commit?
4. What should happen if a victim or victim’s family has forgiven a criminal on death row?
5. Is killing a police officer worse than killing a citizen? Should the punishment be more harsh?
6. What does race have to do with the death penalty?

WRITE IT

Choose one of the questions above and write a paragraph stating your own opinion.

DEBATE IT

Below are two topics to debate in small groups or pairs. Your teacher will tell you if you will be debating for or against the idea. You will have ten minutes to prepare your arguments.

Topic #1:
A death penalty sentence is more severe than a sentence of life in prison with no chance of parole.

Topic #2
All countries will have abolished capital punishment by the year 2020.
ANSWER KEY/TEACHER’S NOTES

Please note: The reading for this topic is also available in full-page format at the end of the lesson (page 4).

Comprehension:

1. Another word for the death penalty is capital punishment. “Capital” means “the head” in Latin. Long ago, capital punishment usually referred to cutting off someone’s head.

2. About 50% of countries have abolished the death penalty.

3. Autopsies of previous death row inmates sometimes show that lethal injection does not always go as planned. The injections can take longer than planned or cause severe pain.

4. Amnesty International feels that the death penalty is the ultimate denial of human rights.

5. Poor criminals are more likely to face the death penalty because they cannot afford good lawyers.

Vocabulary:

A. Match the words

1. f  2. a  3. c  4. b  5. g  6. d  7. e  8. i  9. l  10. k  11. j  12. h

B. Choose the correct word

1. death row  2. autopsy  3. torture  4. deter  5. parole
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