

# On the decline: murders and death sentences

Raleigh News & Observer, October 31, 2010



MCT

BY FRANK R. BAUMGARTNER

Tags: [news](#) | [opinion - editorial](#) | [point of view](#)

CHAPEL HILL -- Recently in several parts of North Carolina potential voters received fliers produced by the N.C. Republican Executive Committee charging that Democratic votes for the Racial Justice Act could lead to the immediate parole of death row inmates, allowing them to move into "your neighborhood," thanks to "ultra-liberal" members of the legislature such as Rep. Hugh Holliman.

In fact, the only "remedy" a death row inmate would be eligible for if a state court did indeed find racial bias affected the outcome of his case would be to see his death sentence changed to life without the possibility of parole.

Even more surprising, perhaps, is that the committee singled out the House majority leader for his vote; Holliman's own daughter was murdered in 1985 and he supports the death penalty.

Crime is always an emotional subject and in an election period appearing "tough on crime" can seem politically expedient. But certainly we should be careful with the facts as well.

North Carolina has not executed anyone since 2006. Some of the "tough on crime" voices claim that when executions are halted murder rates will increase, but as it turns out, the facts point in the opposite direction.

The state Department of Justice reported in July that murder rate declined by 19.1 percent in 2009 compared to 2008. The number of murders in 2009 was 482, and the rate per 100,000 population 5.5. These are the lowest numbers on record during the modern period of capital punishment.

In fact, the murder rate has been declining steadily since reaching its peak of 11.42 per 100,000 population in 1991. Following national trends, homicides have declined steadily since that time, reaching 8.5 per 100,000 in 1997, 6.8 in 2002 and generally staying in that area until 2008 when they declined sharply to the current figure of 5.5 in 2009.

Let us hope that the latest number is a continuation of a trend, not just a one-year fluke. But there is no mistaking the longer-term trend: Homicides in North Carolina, as in the nation, increased sharply from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s, and have been on a steady downward trend since then.

We now have a homicide rate of less than half what it was at the peak. And the absolute number of homicides is lower now than it was at any time since 1976, despite a dramatic rise in the population. These are developments North Carolinians can be proud of.

One of the responses to the rise in crime rates in the 1980s and 1990s was steadily increasing support for, and use of, the death penalty. Since the late-1990s, however, and accelerating in recent years, the death penalty has been on the retreat. Again, these trends affect our state as well as the nation as a whole.

North Carolina reached its peak in death sentences with 34 inmates condemned in 1995. These numbers declined regularly until they were in the single digits by 2002, and numbered just 4, 3, 1 and 2 from 2006 to 2009. No executions have taken place since 2006.

Are North Carolinians in greater danger because fewer executions and death sentences are taking place? A simple look at the numbers suggests otherwise. From 1995, death sentences and murder rates have declined in virtual lock-step, much to the surprise of those who would suggest that executions are a strong deterrent to violent crime. Data from our state suggest that we have paid no price in terms of violence as we have suspended executions after so many recent controversies relating to innocent men spending years on death row and concerns about the constitutionality of our execution method.

The death penalty is the object of great controversy, and many of us believe in it as an abstract principle. But here in North Carolina we have had a series of chilling lessons about how the death sentence actually works as revelations about innocent men on death row and, most

recently, reports of misconduct in the State Bureau of Investigation's crime lab have come to light. It is reassuring to know that at the same time that our use of capital punishment has declined, so too have murder rates. Perhaps we can be smart on crime and have lower crime rates. The numbers suggest that we can.

Frank R. Baumgartner is professor of political science at UNC-Chapel Hill and co-author of "The Decline of the Death Penalty and the Discovery of Innocence." He can be reached at [Frankb@unc.edu](mailto:Frankb@unc.edu).

Originally published: <http://www.newsobserver.com/2010/10/31/769140/on-the-decline-murders-and-death.html>