

# Perceptions of the Death Penalty Among College Students

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## Introduction

- The death penalty has long been a very controversial issue in the U.S.
- Few studies to date have specifically focused on the attitudes of college students as it relates to this issue.
- This study specifically focused on the difference in attitudes between students majoring in the field of criminal justice and those in other majors.

## Literature Review

- Past research has analyzed the relationship between a wide variety of individual attributes and support for the death penalty.
- Previous studies have found males more likely to support the death penalty than females, Whites to more supportive of it than non-whites and African Americans, and more punitive attitudes among Republicans than Democrats.
- Two studies measuring the punitive attitudes of college students based on semester standing found seniors to have less punitive attitudes than freshmen.
- A recent study of college students found gender, race, age, socioeconomic status, political affiliation, having a family member be a victim of murder, or taking a death penalty class to not be significant factors in one's support for the death penalty.



## Methodology

- This study utilized an anonymous survey of undergraduate students currently enrolled at a northeast Pennsylvania university.
- Sample: 58 returned surveys as the n in this study
- Independent Variables: college major, gender, semester standing, political affiliation, family member or friend who was the victim of a crime in the past 3 years
- Dependent Variables: 5 point Likert scale responses
- Research Question: Is there a significant difference in attitudes between students in a criminal justice program and those in other programs?
- Spearman's Rho was used to analyze this fully ordered, ordinal level data

## Results

- Overall, students in the criminal justice program did not give responses that were significantly different of all other students.
- A moderate relationship between major and the perception that racial/ethnic minorities were more likely to be sentenced to death can be seen. With those in the criminal justice program somewhat more cognizant of this.
- Similarly, the other independent variables of gender, semester standing, political affiliation, and family/friend victimization showed little significance in relation to the dependent variables.

## Discussion/Conclusion

- The findings of this research has considerable implications, as the study analyzed the attitudes of individuals who will be entering the field of criminal justice.
- Even for students not planning on entering this field, the study gives insight into the perceptions of citizens who serve on juries and vote.
- Limitations of this study are the potential for spurious relationships, as multivariate analysis was not conducted. These findings are not generalizable as the study was conducted at only a single college campus.
- These results may indicate that much of the concepts put forth in this survey are well-known to the entire student population, not only those who have taken criminal justice classes.
- Future research can expand on these limitations by implementing this survey at a variety of campuses and also by having a larger n.

|   |                     | Major               | Gender | Semester Standing | Political Affiliation | Family Member/Friend Victim of a Crime | Support Use of the Death Penalty | Death Penalty Should be Used More Frequently | Death Penalty Applied Fairly in this Country | Death Penalty is Less Costly than Life in Prison | Racial/Ethnic Minorities More Likely to be Sentenced to Death | States with Death Penalty Experience Lower Crime |
|---|---------------------|---------------------|--------|-------------------|-----------------------|--|----------------------------------|--|--|--|---|--|
| Gender  | Pearson Correlation | 0.046               |        |                   |                       |  |                                  |  |  |  |   |  |
|   | Sig. (2-tailed)     | 0.734               |        |                   |                       |  |                                  |  |  |  |   |  |
|   | N                   | 56                  |        |                   |                       |  |                                  |  |  |  |   |  |
| Semester Standing   | Pearson Correlation | .489 <sup>**</sup>  | -0.175 |                   |                       |  |                                  |  |  |  |   |  |
|   | Sig. (2-tailed)     | 0.000               | 0.192  |                   |                       |  |                                  |  |  |  |   |  |
|   | N                   | 57                  | 57     |                   |                       |  |                                  |  |  |  |   |  |
| Political Affiliation   | Pearson Correlation | -0.004              | -0.226 | 0.151             |                       |  |                                  |  |  |  |   |  |
|   | Sig. (2-tailed)     | 0.974               | 0.094  | 0.266             |                       |  |                                  |  |  |  |   |  |
|   | N                   | 55                  | 56     | 56                |                       |  |                                  |  |  |  |   |  |
| Family Member/Friend Victim of a Crime                        | Pearson Correlation | -.351 <sup>**</sup> | -0.042 | 0.012             | -0.238                |  |                                  |  |  |  |   |  |
|   | Sig. (2-tailed)     | 0.007               | 0.754  | 0.927             | 0.077                 |  |                                  |  |  |  |   |  |
|   | N                   | 57                  | 57     | 58                | 56                    |  |                                  |  |  |  |   |  |
| Support Use of the Death Penalty                              | Pearson Correlation | -0.173              | -0.226 | 0.059             | -0.043                | 0.001                                  |                                  |  |  |  |   |  |
|   | Sig. (2-tailed)     | 0.202               | 0.094  | 0.660             | 0.756                 | 0.994                                  |                                  |  |  |  |   |  |
|   | N                   | 56                  | 56     | 57                | 55                    | 57                                     |                                  |  |  |  |   |  |
| Death Penalty Should be Used More Frequently                  | Pearson Correlation | -0.117              | -0.192 | 0.123             | 0.061                 | 0.066                                  | .777 <sup>**</sup>               |  |  |  |   |  |
|   | Sig. (2-tailed)     | 0.389               | 0.155  | 0.362             | 0.657                 | 0.628                                  | 0.000                            |  |  |  |   |  |
|   | N                   | 56                  | 56     | 57                | 55                    | 57                                     | 57                               |  |  |  |   |  |
| Death Penalty is Applied Fairly in this Country               | Pearson Correlation | -0.067              | 0.017  | -0.099            | -0.010                | -0.033                                 | 0.215                            | 0.109  |  |  |   |  |
|   | Sig. (2-tailed)     | 0.623               | 0.903  | 0.464             | 0.939                 | 0.807                                  | 0.108                            | 0.421  |  |  |   |  |
|   | N                   | 56                  | 56     | 57                | 55                    | 57                                     | 57                               | 57   |  |  |   |  |
| Death Penalty is Less Costly than Life in Prison              | Pearson Correlation | -0.085              | 0.000  | 0.099             | -0.215                | 0.253                                  | .267 <sup>*</sup>                | .337 <sup>*</sup>                            | 0.237  |  |   |  |
|   | Sig. (2-tailed)     | 0.535               | 1.000  | 0.462             | 0.114                 | 0.057                                  | 0.044                            | 0.010  | 0.076  |  |   |  |
|   | N                   | 56                  | 56     | 57                | 55                    | 57                                     | 57                               | 57   | 57   |  |   |  |
| Racial/Ethnic Minorities More Likely to be Sentenced to Death | Pearson Correlation | .272 <sup>*</sup>   | 0.210  | 0.130             | -0.007                | 0.096                                  | -.507 <sup>**</sup>              | -.401 <sup>**</sup>                          | -0.132                                       | -0.103   |   |  |
|   | Sig. (2-tailed)     | 0.043               | 0.121  | 0.336             | 0.957                 | 0.480                                  | 0.000                            | 0.002  | 0.333  | 0.449  |   |  |
|   | N                   | 56                  | 56     | 57                | 55                    | 57                                     | 56                               | 56   | 56   | 56   |   |  |
| States with Death Penalty Experience Lower Crime              | Pearson Correlation | -0.186              | 0.016  | 0.041             | -0.226                | 0.149                                  | .383 <sup>**</sup>               | .334 <sup>**</sup>                           | .296 <sup>**</sup>                           | .510 <sup>**</sup>                               | -0.178  |  |
|   | Sig. (2-tailed)     | 0.171               | 0.907  | 0.762             | 0.098                 | 0.270                                  | 0.003                            | 0.011  | 0.025  | 0.000  | 0.190   |  |
|   | N                   | 56                  | 56     | 57                | 55                    | 57                                     | 57                               | 57   | 57   | 57   | 56  |  |
| Poor individuals More Likely to be Sentenced to Death         | Pearson Correlation | 0.089               | 0.031  | 0.002             | 0.052                 | 0.018                                  | -.393 <sup>**</sup>              | -.373 <sup>**</sup>                          | -0.235                                       | -.276 <sup>**</sup>                              | .590 <sup>**</sup>  | -.357 <sup>**</sup>                              |
|   | Sig. (2-tailed)     | 0.514               | 0.821  | 0.987             | 0.707                 | 0.894                                  | 0.003                            | 0.005  | 0.081  | 0.039  | 0.000   | 0.007  |
|   | N                   | 56                  | 56     | 57                | 55                    | 57                                     | 56                               | 56   | 56   | 56   | 56  | 56   |

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).  
\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).