

Texas death row inmates research paper

[Law](#), [Death Penalty](#)



English Literature

On the Texan Death Row, how many inmates have expressed sorrow and remorse, and how many of them have expressed anger.

Understandably, if the prisoner is aware of their innocence or guilt, then they are far more likely to act accordingly: if an innocent man was charged and sentenced to be placed on death row amongst the absolute scum of the Earth, it would be understandable for him to express a lot of anger. However, for the prisoners who have been charged and their innocence not proven, some express remorse whilst others express anger anyway. The purpose of this essay is to explore whether inmates do express either of these emotions and whether this reflects the effectiveness of the death penalty or not: arguably, if an inmate expresses sorrow then they have learnt their lesson, but if they express anger then does their sentence make a difference to their attitude.

The American death penalty has been in force for a long time - the earliest death penalty sentence can be dated back as far as the eighteenth century (DPIC). Nationally, there have been around 1, 435 executions since 1982 with the bulk of them taking place between the years of 1995 and 2006 (DPIC). The focus for this essay, is the Texan death row, which as a state, along with Florida and California, has one of the country's largest death row populations (TDCJ). The general argument that stands against the American death penalty is that if the prisoner is found to be innocent later on, they may already have been executed. However, since 1973, the state of Texas has already exonerated twelve prisoners due to the proof of their innocence

(DPIC) which puts Texas in third place in terms of states who have released prisoners from death row.

Under such extreme circumstances, the final words of such inmates are often of interest. In one article, reporter Diane Jennings discussed how before January 12, 1996, 36% of final words admitted responsibility, and 32% expressed sorrow or asked for forgiveness from the victim's family.

Furthermore, after the presentations of the victim's family and friends, 43% of inmates admitted guilt during their last words and 41% expressed sorrow and a desire for forgiveness (Jennings 2010). These findings are extracted from a recent 2009 study which analysed the final words of inmates, carried out by Stephen K. Rice, Danielle Dirks, and Julie J. Exline. Their key statement is that "Criminals are sent to penitentiaries, suggesting that offenders are expected to become penitent for their crimes for which they have been incarcerated." (Dirks et al.) According to their statistics, only 41% of inmates actually do experience this sorrow and regret and that it is due to the "intrapyschic processes" and "interpersonal actions" that occur because of the unique circumstances that a death row inmate experiences.

Arguably then, if 41% of death row inmates express sorrow, then logical thinking suggests that 59% do not. The question here being: what do they express, if anything? Dirks et al. suggest that for inmates who are "poorly bonded to society", repentance can often be difficult due to their inability to accept their fate: "sanction effects sometimes attune to perceived procedural injustice, stigmatization, or a denial of shame" (Dirks et al.) meaning that as they are unable to connect with other human beings on a social, personal level, they are also unable to connect with what they have

done wrong or understand its criminal intent and are therefore, unable to accept their sentence in turn. However, whether they express anger as a result or just a general nonchalance towards their actions, is another question: if they are mentally incapable of understanding what they have done wrong then their ability to express remorse is morally diminished. According to the Texas Department of Criminal Justice website, the average length of time an inmate spends on death row before execution is 10.60 years (TDCJ). This may seem like a long time to have a prisoner awaiting their death but, in this time, the inmates are able to reflect, repent and contemplate their fate. It could be assumed that whilst death row contains some of the state's worst criminals that it can also often be a place where many men and women are able to quietly reflect. Evidently, 41% are able to come to a conclusion of regret and sorrow, whilst others are less able to do so. However, this is more likely to be less a consequence of death row itself, and more due to the individuals' inability to admit fault and/or their defiance when apologising. The purpose of death row is to implement a prison sentence with the futility of death at the end, on the understanding that the prisoner is unable to function in society without causing a great deal of pain and suffering. Under those circumstances, many inmates may view that futility as an excuse to not come to terms with their actions: they may think that regardless of their thoughts or actions whilst on death row, they are going to die. However, that 41% represent the inmates who, following a presentation by the victim's family and friends, feel a need to express their guilt, sorrow and anguish. These are the men for whom death row is at its most effective.

The Texas prisoner's 269 final statements, which made up the evidence in the Dirks et al. study, concluded in a number of statistics: they " were more likely to contain victims' rights-related sentiments" (Dirks et al.) which included 36% admitting guilt, and 32% stating repentance, as opposed to only 19% expressing innocence, 10% declaring capital punishment as unjust, and 10% arguing that they had experience unfair legal proceedings. (Dirks et al).

It also became clear that in the cases where victim's families and friends were permitted to attend executions, the statements of guilt and sorrow were significantly more apparent than when they were not allowed to attend. This is shown by the above graphic i: the ' no' and the ' yes' pertain to whether the victim's survivors were able to attend or not, and the effect (in percentage) of whether the inmate expressed sorrow or not. Between the dates of December 7th 1982 and January 12th 1996, victim's survivors were not allowed to attend executions and the admittance of guilt and repentance is low (14% and 6% respectively). Whereas between the dates of January 12th 1996 and June 7th 2005, the results are significantly higher with admittance of guilt rising to 43% and repentance rising to 41%. (Dirks et al). These statistics clearly demonstrate that the presence of their victim's friends and family had a massive effect on the feelings of sorrow felt by the inmate.

The average person is far more likely to express guilt when being faced with the evidence of their actions: most, honest people are happy to admit fault. However, the stakes are significantly higher when faced with the accusation

of the brutal murder of another human being. For many inmates of Texas' death row, their circumstances are not those of the average person; when faced with their own death, they are likely to deny their guilt until the absolute last. However, the evidence discussed here clearly demonstrates that in their final statements, when faced with the survivors of their victim, a large number of prisoners were able to admit guilt and express their sorrow at their actions. Therefore, the effectiveness of death row in inducing these feelings is clearly improved by the presence of the survivors at the inmate's execution. However, a number of inmates still expressed anger at the injustice of the system and a refusal to accept the consequences of their actions by declaring their legal proceedings to be unjust. According to Dirks et al., these are the inmates who are detached from society and are, therefore, arguably the most dangerous of the inmates and also the least likely to ever change due to their inability to realise the error in their ways. For a large majority though, their final statements expressed sorrow and repentance for their actions, presumably in a final bid for forgiveness. The effectiveness of the death penalty is clear: it provides a set of extreme circumstances which allows the inmate to reflect upon their actions, face up to their own demons and, ultimately, express sorrow or anger in the face of their own death.

Works Cited

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