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MARYLAND STUDY FINDS THAT RACE AND GEOGRAPHY PLAY KEY ROLES IN DEATH PENALTY

WASHINGTON, DC -- According to the findings of a Governor-commissioned death penalty study conducted by researchers at the University of Maryland and released today, the state's death penalty system is tainted with racial bias, and geography plays a significant role in who faces a capital conviction. The study, one of the nation's most comprehensive official reviews on race and the death penalty, concluded that defendants are much more likely to be sentenced to death if they have killed a white person.

"The troubling conclusions of this study further demonstrate the importance of taking a closer look at death penalty policies to ensure fairness," said Richard Dieter, Executive Director of the Death Penalty Information Center. "The key finding of this study is that, when it comes to the death penalty, white lives are considered more valuable than black lives in the state of Maryland. Such a system should not be allowed to stand. This study, as well as the findings of studies in other states around the nation, clearly illustrate the unfairness in capital punishment. Until these injustices are addressed, states should follow the lead of Maryland and Illinois and enact a moratorium on executions to allow further investigation and reform."

The University of Maryland study was ordered in 2000 by Governor Parris Glendening, who saw a need to further examine the role of race in Maryland's death penalty after reviewing the conclusions of a 1996 Maryland Commission review. The 1996 Commission concluded that "the high percentage of African-American prisoners under sentence of death and the low percentage of prisoners under sentence of death whose victims were African-American remains a cause for concern."

While only 28% of Maryland's population is black, 67% of the state's death row is black and 100% of these capital cases involved white victims. The state has one of the highest percentages of black inmates on death row. In 2002, these statistics and the on-going University of Maryland review led Glendening to declare a moratorium on executions. At that time, he said that the moratorium would remain in place until the study's findings could be reviewed and acted on by lawmakers. Governor-elect Robert Ehrlich has stated that he plans to lift the moratorium when he takes office next week.

Among the key findings released today are the following:

- Race of the victim makes a significant difference in whether prosecutors seek a capital conviction. Defendants accused of killing white victims are significantly more likely to face the death penalty than cases with non-white victims.

- When the race of the offender and victim are examined together, the study found that black offenders who kill whites are significantly more likely to face a death sentence than all other racial combinations.

- Prosecutors in different jurisdictions exhibit considerable variation in the extent to which they seek the death penalty.

- Racial bias is detected in the early stages of prosecution when state's attorneys decide whether to seek a death sentence. The initial disparity is not corrected at the later stages of cases and so its effects persist after conviction, when prosecutors make a final decision whether to pursue a death sentence, or in the final judgment by judges or juries.

The executive summary of the study is available on the University of Maryland's Web site, http://www.urhome.umd.edu/newsdesk/pdf/exec.pdf, and the final report may be found at http://www.urhome.umd.edu/newsdesk/pdf/finalrep.pdf.

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