

For immediate release: June 22, 2023

Contact: Margot Friedman at mfriedman@dupontcirclecommunications.com
deathpenaltyinfo.org Twitter: @DPInfoCtr

New Report Places Tennessee's Death Penalty in its Historical Context of Lynchings and Mass Racial Violence Against Black Tennesseans

As the Tennessee Department of Correction develops new lethal injection protocols and prepares to resume executions, the Death Penalty Information Center (DPIC) today released a deeply researched report that documents the historical role of racial discrimination and racial terror in Tennessee's death penalty and details how that history continues to influence the administration of capital punishment.

The report, "Doomed to Repeat: The Legacy of Race in Tennessee's Contemporary Death Penalty," is available at <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/facts-and-research/dpic-reports/dpic-special-reports/how-racial-history-informs-tennessees-death-penalty>

"Ten Facts You Should Know About Tennessee's Death Penalty Administration" is available at <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/stories/ten-facts-you-should-know-about-tennessees-death-penalty-administration>

"The government has a responsibility to treat people of all races equally. As Tennessee considers resuming executions, now is a good time to examine whether the state is meeting that responsibility when it imposes the most severe criminal punishment," said Tiana Herring, DPIC's Data Storyteller and the lead author of the report.

Tennessee's history informs today's practices. Tennessee was the site of [more than 500 lynchings](#), according to Tennesseans for Historical Justice, and a nationwide [study](#) of death sentences between 1989 and 2017 found a significant statistical relationship between a state's history of lynching and the number of death sentences given to Black defendants. As the report states, "State House Representative Paul Sherrell's suggestion to allow executions by hanging people on trees earlier this year shows the continued relevance of history."

The report documents that Tennessee prosecutors are more likely to seek the death penalty, and juries are more likely to impose it, when the victim is white. Of all death sentences imposed in the state since 1972, 74% have involved white victims. The race-of-victim effect can also be seen in other aspects of the criminal legal system; for example, between 2013 and 2021, 29% of homicides of Black victims in the state went unsolved, compared to 11% of homicides of white victims.

The report highlights how white officials were often complicit when lynchings and other forms of white mob violence occurred. In a not uncommon example: in 1893, a 19-year-old Black man named Lee Walker who was accused of attempting to rape a white woman was lynched after the sheriff ordered his deputies to stand aside when the mob entered the jail.

The jailer then gave the mob the key to his cell. As the report states, “Lynchers operated without fear in Tennessee as local authorities regularly refused to investigate lynchings. Law enforcement often concluded that deceased lynching victims had been killed by unknown parties, despite photographic and other evidence proving otherwise.”

“Nothing can change the fact that racial violence and discrimination are part of Tennessee’s history. But studying the past can help us understand why racial disparities continue today, especially in our death penalty system, and inform future decisions,” said Robin Maher, DPIC’s Executive Director.

Today’s report builds upon DPIC’s 2020 [report](#), “Enduring Injustice: the Persistence of Racial Discrimination in the U.S. Death Penalty.” It is the second in a series of reports detailing how individual state histories of racial injustice inform the current use of capital punishment. In 2022, DPIC released “Deeply Rooted: How Racial History Informs Oklahoma’s Death Penalty” at <https://tinyurl.com/bdddu6ex>.

###

The Death Penalty Information Center (www.deathpenaltyinfo.org) is a non-profit organization serving the media and the public with analysis and information on issues concerning capital punishment. DPIC was founded in 1990 and prepares in-depth reports, issues press releases, conducts briefings for the media, and serves as a resource to those working on this issue. DPIC does not take a position on the death penalty but has been critical of how it is administered.