

Death penalty wastes money, while failing to reduce crime

By Norm Stamper

Article Launched: 11/19/2007 01:31:37 AM PST

Last Tuesday, about 50 people gathered outside the Santa Clara County Superior Court building to urge District Attorney Dolores Carr to stop seeking death sentences. It was the 11th stop for the 800-mile "Walk to Stop Executions" that is making the same plea to district attorneys across the state. As a 29-year veteran of the San Diego Police Department, I urge everyone to support this important request.

I confess to more than a few occasions during my 34-year career as a police officer when, in opposition to my conscience, I wished for someone's sudden death. Cop killers, child killers, cold-blooded murderers come to mind.

I recall rooting for my cops to "take out" Joselito Cinco, who shot and killed two exceptional San Diego police officers. Armed with a 9 mm semiautomatic, Cinco gave officers Kimberly Tonahill and Timothy Ruopp no time to draw their weapons. He simply ambushed them and then fled into the brush and disappeared. A deputy chief at the time, I was at the scene for hours that damp night, hoping my cops would corner and kill the shooter. Dogs and a helicopter finally caught up with Cinco early the next morning. He surrendered meekly, giving our officers no justification to fire their weapons.

When it came time to sentence Cinco for his horrific crimes, I prayed that he would be sentenced to life without parole instead of death. Why? Despite my visceral reactions to violent offenders, while working as a police officer I discovered that the death penalty is inefficient and extravagantly expensive. Prosecuting and publicly defending a capital case - through up to 11 years of appeals - can cost taxpayers millions of dollars more than simply locking someone up for the rest of his or her life. The Los Angeles Times reports that the death penalty system in California alone costs \$114 million per year over the costs of locking up prisoners for life.

Spending all this money on the death penalty might be worth it - if it actually made our communities safer. But it doesn't. If capital punishment were a deterrent, you'd think our murder rate (20,000 killings a year) would be among the lowest in the civilized world. But in fact, it's close to topping the list. According to the New York Times, the 12 states that have abolished the death penalty boast average homicide rates consistently lower than in those states that kill their killers. In fact, a 20-year analysis revealed that 10 of those 12 non-death penalty states have homicide rates lower than the national average.

Our communities would be exponentially better off by reinvesting the time, money and resources we spend on trying to get a few people executed into crime prevention measures that work. Spending scarce public resources on after-school programs, mental health care, drug and alcohol treatment, education, more crime labs and new

technologies, or on hiring more police officers, would truly help create safer communities.

More than 120 innocent people have been sentenced to death in modern times. Cutting back appeals to save money and speed up executions only increases the risk of wrongful convictions - and wrongful executions. Experts aren't sure how many innocent people have actually been executed, but I think most people would agree that one is too many.

Life in prison, with no prayer of parole, should be the toughest sentence on our books. It ensures that the guilty never get out, keeps us from ever executing an innocent person, and allows us to spend the millions of dollars, wasted each year on the death penalty, on programs that will actually make us safer.

This is why I have joined the Walk to Stop Executions, and why you should consider joining, too.

NORM STAMPER is a former Seattle police chief and a 29-year veteran of the San Diego Police Department. He is the author of "Breaking Rank: A Top Cop's Exposé of the Dark Side of American Policing." He wrote this article for the Mercury News.