

**Support for Capital Punishment:
The Role of Parenthood and Suburbanism
in Death Penalty Opinions**

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Throughout 2014, 35 convicts found guilty of a capital crime were executed in the United States (Death Penalty Information Center 2015). As of March 1, 2015, over three thousand inmates remain on death row nation-wide (2015). Although the number of death sentences per year has radically decreased since 1999 (2015), America is consistently found within the top five countries with the highest rate of capital punishment convictions (Iaccino 2014). Nonetheless, with national opinions regularly approving of the death penalty, attitudes surrounding support for capital punishment in the United States has been historically debated (Bohm 2007).

Social scientists have struggled to determine why support for capital punishment exists within a noticeably divided nation. In 2014, 63% of surveyed Americans reported to support the death penalty (Jones 2014), but a variety of prospective reasons have surfaced for why that support might exist. Many sociologists have determined that personal attributes, place of residence, and personal reservations surrounding circumstances within each case may determine why an individual may support or oppose the death penalty (Akers and Radlet 1996; Fagan, Liebman and West 2000; Lacock and Radlet 2009). Two particular variables that stand out include the influence of having children in addition to one's location of residence. Though the influence that the presence of children has yet to be thoroughly studied, current theory suggests that this variable may have a considerable impact on support. This paper examines how the presence of children in one's life and an individual's place of residence can come together to influence individual attitudes on support for capital punishment.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Due to the large ethical dilemmas and political controversy which surround this definitive sentence (Bohm 2007), support for capital punishment has been consistently debated in the United States. Academic studies have concluded that there are a number of different reasons to why someone may or may not endorse the death penalty (Akers and Radlet 1996; Fagan, Liebman and West 2000; Lacock and Radlet 2009). Some individuals believe that capital punishment provides closure for the families of victims and will act as a deterrent, while those in opposition argue that the death penalty puts innocent lives at risk and that life without parole is a practical alternative (Lacock and Radlet 2009). A variety of individuals have written on this topic including Sutherland's argument promoting the death penalty as a general crime deterrent (Akers and Radlet 1996), as well as Liebman's study on wrongful convictions and finding innocence in capital punishment cases (Fagan, Liebman and West 2000). Records indicate that attitudes surrounding the death penalty have fluctuated throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century, though national opinions have regularly approved of the punishment (Bohm 2007). In an October 2014 survey of American citizens, 63% claim to support capital punishment for individuals convicted of murder (Jones 2014).

Anyone who claims to support capital punishment is positively endorsing the death penalty for individuals who have been found guilty of committing murder. It should be noted, however, that one's willingness to support the death penalty is often contingent on a variety of circumstances; perceptions of justice and trust in the legal and corrections system are all components which may determine an individual's opinion on capital punishment (Foster and Thomas 1975). The absence of a concrete definition for "murder" is also likely to sway the probability of endorsement for capital punishment (Bohm 2007). Similarly, circumstances

surrounding a particular case may also have an effect on death penalty support (Fagan, Liebman and West 2000); many believe that past-offenders and particularly gruesome murders should face harsher punishments in comparison to first-time offenders and those convicted of involuntary manslaughter. In other cases, support for capital punishment may waver if the mental ability of a convict is in question (2000); insanity defenses in a trial may play a large role in one's support for sentencing a convicted murderer to death (Bohm 2007).

Support for the death penalty is not only related to an individual's perception of justice and the legal system, but also personal characteristics of the individuals themselves (Bohm 2007); family status, especially parenthood, is likely to impact people's decisions. There are a couple of logical reasons to believe that the presence of children in an individual's life will increase their support for capital punishment. Though there has been little research done surrounding the relationship between the presence of children and support for capital punishment, however, it is logical to believe that people with children are more likely to have stronger views about safety and security than those without.

For most parents, the desire to protect their child is a universal instinct (Keltner, Marsh, and Smith 2010). Naturally, most parents are constantly on the lookout to protect their offspring from potential dangers; these parents are likely to exercise extreme levels of caution in an attempt to protect their young (Keltner, Marsh, and Smith 2010). Theory states that the simple presence of children will positively affect an individual's support for capital punishment (2010). It does not matter if an individual has one or many children, the parental instinct to provide safety and support for any amount of offspring is no different for parents of large or small families (2010). Consequently, if a parent believes that sentencing a convicted murder to death

will deter future crime from occurring (ultimately allowing their child to grow up in a safer environment) then they may endorse the death penalty.

Evidence regarding direction and stability between support for capital punishment and presence of children are positively correlated when used to control for other variables (Foster and Thomas 1975). There is, however, a lack of evidence in academic literature surrounding the direct relationship between support for the death penalty and the presence of children. When other variables are controlled, the presence of children in an individual's life appears to have a consistently positive relationship with support for capital punishment (1975).

The division over support for capital punishment preferences are not just related to the presence of offspring, but can also vary based on the type of community one lives in. I predict that suburbanites are likely to be strong supporters of capital punishment. Suburban communities typically list high levels of safety and security as a main reason for living in their community (Donnermeyer 1995). Many suburbanites relocate from urban cities to the suburbs because they feel unsafe and vulnerable to crime in their urban homes; these individuals are likely to have strong views about safety and be harsher on criminal punishments (McGhee 2008). This opinion that most suburbanites have about crime promotes acts of deterrence as an effort to eradicate crime from the streets before it transpires.

Moreover, suburbanites' view of crime, drugs, and violence as a problem has fluctuated in recent years (Schuster 2014). In 2010, the National Suburban Poll reported that 64% of those living in suburban homes believe that crime, drugs, and violence are at least a small problem where they live; 54% say that their communities should focus on removing these issues (Schuster 2014). This belief that criminal activity is a problem in the suburbs may drive residents to support capital punishment as a deterrent measure within their community. If residents do not

feel safe in their homes (a value proven to be strong within this population) (Schuster 2014), then acts of prevention and retribution may serve necessary to eradicate crime and violence from suburban areas.

Unlike individuals who live in suburban neighborhoods, urban residents are likely to oppose the death penalty. People who live in urban areas are more likely to have less children than those who live in suburban and rural locations (Crowder and South 1997). Due to the lack of child presence, many urban citizens may not need to support higher levels of safety and security because they are not responsible for another life (Keltner, Marsh, and Smith 2010). Additionally, urban locations typically boast high levels of individuals who identify with a liberal political party (Florida 2013); this could similarly influence their support or opposition for the death penalty. *Student News Daily* writes that, “liberals believe in government action to achieve equal opportunity and equality for all” (2005). By this definition, liberal, urban individuals may argue that the death penalty risks killing innocent people; this is clearly observed in urban support for alternative forms of capital punishment, such as life in prison without the possibility for parole (Death Penalty Information Center 2015). This way, rather than implementing a life or death penalty, there is an alternative punishment.

The support for alternative forms of capital punishment is not equally represented across all places of residence; just as observed in suburban regions, living in a rural area is positively correlated with support for capital punishment (Feld 1991). Additionally, individuals who live in rural regions are likely to have children present in their lives (Crowder and South 1997) unlike those who live in urban areas. Similarly observed in suburban locations, the presence of children in the lives of rural residents causes these individuals to be constantly on the lookout for potential dangers (Keltner, Marsh and Smith 2010). In an effort to protect offspring from harm,

these parents are likely to exercise extreme levels of caution in an attempt to protect their young (2010). Furthermore, rural areas typically boast large conservative voters who “believe the role of government should be to provide people the freedom necessary to pursue their own goals” (Student News Daily 2005). Traditionally, conservative individuals are not necessarily concerned with providing equal opportunity for all citizens and giving people the benefit of the doubt (2005). Unlike the liberal argument stating that capital punishment risks killing innocent people, conservatives believe that the execution of a murderer is a suitable penalty for taking another life. Typically, people who live in rural areas support the death penalty rather than alternative punishments such as life in prison without the possibility for parole (Death Penalty Information Center 2015).

Differences between prosecution and sentencing for murder in urban, suburban, and rural areas are clearly mirrored in the community’s support for capital punishment (Bohm 2007; Feld 1991; Pierce and Radelet 2005). Legislative audit studies have concluded that even though “the number of potentially capital murders in urban areas is far larger than the number of such murders in rural and nonurban jurisdictions” (Bienen 1992), capital sentencing for convicted murderers is most likely to occur in rural and suburban communities (Bienen 1992; Feld 1991; American Civil Liberties Union 2002).

A quantitative study on the factors surrounding capital punishment in Californian homicides concluded that the highest rate of capital punishment sentencing occurs in areas with low population densities. In these low density communities, “1.84 out of every 100 homicides results in a death sentence, [but in urban environments] .58 out of 100 homicides results in a death sentence” (Pierce and Radlet 2005). By these statistics, a person convicted of the murder is 300% more likely to be sentenced to death just because they committed their crime in a rural

community rather than an urban area (2005). High levels of death penalty sentences and support for capital punishment is observed in rural communities, whereas the death sentence is less likely to be used in urban areas (2005).

It is possible that the anticipated higher rate of support for capital punishment among residents can be somewhat due to the presence children. Many people who live in suburban neighborhoods tend to be parents (Stegman 1969), which may explain for why suburbanites value high levels of safety and security; typically, suburban neighborhoods have less perceived crime when compared to their urban counterparts (1969), which also makes neighborhood safety an attractive feature for growing families (Langdon 1994). Due to the observable interaction between family size and suburbanism, the relationships between each variable and an individual's support for capital punishment may be difficult to distinguish from each other. The presence of children and place of residence may act as simultaneous effects which increase support for capital punishment, this may make it more difficult to predict the consequences of changing the value of both independent variables.

In this paper, I strive to determine the relationship between the presence of children in one's life and their support for capital punishment for persons convicted of murder. Also, I will aim to find if the place of residence has an effect of one's support for the death penalty. I hypothesize that suburban residency and the presence of children will produce an interaction effect, potentially altering the ability to see a direct relationship between the two independent variables and the dependent variable. In controlling for place of residence, this paper will use a three-category variable to regulate the differences between rural, suburban, and urban citizen's support for capital punishment.

DATA AND METHODS

The data for this study comes from the 2012 General Social Survey (GSS), one of the most frequently cited sources of data in social science research (National Opinion Research Center 2015). The GSS is a bi-annually composed national representative sample of 5,000 adult respondents who are asked a variety of questions regarding their demographic, personal characteristics, opinions, and attitudes toward different topics. My analytical sample contains only individuals who answered all of the GSS questions in specific regard to support for capital punishment, family size, and residential location. The resulting sample size contains 4,518 respondents.

The General Social Survey includes a single item measure of support for capital punishment, where respondents are asked: “Do you favor or oppose the death penalty for persons convicted of murder?” Respondents can then choose one of the following answers as reflected in a bivariate nominal scale: “Favor” or “Oppose.” In this question, respondents do not have the opportunity to respond that they “Do not know,” nor can they select “Other” as a response; this indicates that support or opposition may be contingent on circumstances surrounding the crime.

Due the limited nominal scale, the measure of support for disagreement is prone to minor bias. Respondents may be unwilling to support a capital punishment conviction because they do not know the details surrounding the case. The individual being prosecuted may have circumstantial evidence that may lead to a justifiable murder, or the defendant could have biological or emotional factors which could ultimately deter a respondent from claiming to support the death penalty in that particular case (Bohm 2007). Consequently, the measure may systematically decrease or result in multiple respondents not answering the question because they feel it is too circumstantial. There is no reason, however, to suspect that this bias is correlated

with support for capital punishment; it is not likely that the effects of family size or place of residency will be due to a respondent's likelihood of support or opposition being contingent on the circumstances surrounding a crime. Secondly, this singular measure of support or opposition asks respondents to narrow down their answers into a "Favor" or "Oppose" nominal measure. Because of this, respondents may be more likely to omit from answering the question because they are not provided with the possibility of indicating an alternate answer ("Other" or "It depends") as an option.

The 2012 General Social Survey asks respondents, "How many children have you ever had? Please count all that were born alive at any time (including from a previous marriage);" respondents are asked to answer this question in an ordinal scale with possible answers ranging from "0" to "Eight or more." In this paper, the measure of a respondent's family size is collapsed from an ordinal into a nominal scale: 0 children or 1+ children. I use this scale for the sake of simply identifying if a respondent has any children present in their lives in addition to the simplicity of result presentation. Current theory does not suggest that there is an additional difference for support or opposition of capital punishment if a respondent has more than one child (Keltner, Marsh and Smith 2010), it is simply the presence of children in one's life which will ultimately determine their support for the death penalty or not.

Because this paper is not controlling for age, potential bias lies in the argument that some respondents may select "0" children because their kids have left their home. Nonetheless, because the survey specifically asks to "count all [children] that were born alive at any time, (including from a previous marriage)" respondents who have adult children or have children who they do not have custody of are still included in this measure. In this way, it can be said that this GSS question is measuring "parenthood," or how many respondents have had the experience of

having or raising kids. Because this study examines how individual's thoughts on safety and security are likely related to parenthood status and where people choose to live, this measure of "presence of children" is particularly strong.

Though the General Social Survey does not ask respondents to provide any information regarding their place of residence, the survey does report what region the GSS interview takes place in, as well as the region's city size. Differentiating between the population for urban, suburban and rural residential locations are notoriously difficult because there is no concrete definition for urbanity, suburbanism or rurality. In response, I collapse the measure of the respondent's (interview) city population into three different categories of urban, suburban, and rural places of residence. In this study, "Urban" contains medium and large central cities of 50,000 to 250,000+ residents; "Suburban" refers to cities outlying a medium and large central city, as well as unincorporated areas of medium and large central cities; and "Rural" is comprised of small cities ranging from 2,500 to 49,999 residents, in addition to unincorporated areas with less than 2,500 residents, and open country within larger civil divisions.

Concern may rise regarding the complaint that each category contains too broad of measurement between city size and population. However, place of residence's measure is directly related to the General Social Survey's definition of small, medium, and large cities, which is ultimately represented in my division between urban, suburban, and rural residential locations. It should also be noted that an individual's current place of residence may not reflect their desired destination. There may be, for example, people who live in urban areas who wish to relocate to the suburbs, but for various reasons, have not. As a result, this study's measure of "current place of residence" is used as a proxy, though an imperfect one, for action upon convictions regarding safety and security.

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