

On the Death Penalty: Voices from Missouri's African American Community

A Listening Project of the American Friends Service Committee-St. Louis Office

About the American Friends Service Committee

The American Friends Service Committee is moving towards a century of service, development, social justice, and peace programs throughout the world. Founded by Quakers in 1917 to provide conscientious objectors with an opportunity to aid civilian war victims, AFSC's work attracts the support and partnership of people of many races, religions, and cultures. The organization won worldwide recognition in 1947 when it accepted the Nobel Peace Prize with the British Friends Service Council on behalf of all Quakers.

AFSC is steadfast in its commitment to the principles of nonviolence and justice; it seeks in its work and witness to draw on the transforming power of love, human and divine. The work of AFSC is guided by its lofty mission to transform conditions and relationships both in the world and in themselves, which threaten to overwhelm what is precious in human beings. The Quaker belief that ultimately goodness can prevail over evil and that oppression in all its many forms can give way to cooperation, equality, justice and dignity.

AFSC has offices in over 40 cities in the US. They work on a myriad of issues including militarism, poverty, criminal justice and immigration, just to name a few. AFSC also has offices in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin American, the Caribbean and the Middle East.

History of the Listening Project on the Death Penalty

In 2008, the American Friends Service Committee and the National Black Caucus of States Institute (NBCSI) agreed to a partnership to ascertain the viewpoints of African Americans regarding the death penalty.

The partnership hoped to engage:

- African American state legislators and policymakers
- Religious leaders and institutions
- Members of community-based and grassroots organizations
- Victims, prisoners, and those who are relationship to the criminal justice system –
Their family, friends, neighbors, and concerned citizens
- People who work toward efforts of anti-violence
- People with interests in criminal justice

This listening project gathered the perspectives and experiences representing the broadest array of political, religious, and social thinking among African Americans. Although AFSC is categorically opposed to the death penalty, the project was undertaken in a manner that was without prejudice and preconceptions, respecting all who participated.

The goals of the Death Penalty Listening Project are to:

1. Provide an opportunity for African Americans to express their views on the issue
2. Ascertain differences in geographical, gender, age, religious in responses
3. Determine whether there could be follow up to engage respondents regardless of their views on the issue.

It is an unscientific process but AFSC has found listening projects on issues to be powerful tools in engaging voices (sometimes not often solicited or heard in the public discourse) and motivating action based upon the findings of the listening project. It increases capacity to understand and long term, brings about further responses to issues and concerns that result in greater society well being.

The training and process

The training consisted of activities where listeners practiced good listening techniques. Listeners interviewed one another to get the feel of the survey questions but also to make changes that improved the final version of the questions.

There were three listeners in the Kansas City area who enlisted 60 respondents in that area. One of those listeners also interviewed three respondents in Jefferson City and three in Columbia. Six listeners interviewed 58 respondents in St. Louis.

The survey contained 38 questions, many containing multiple subset questions depending on how one answered the primary question.

One of the major flaws on the listening project was that listeners did not revisit answers when they were contradictory. An example is a respondent would answer he/she *never* votes yet would answer their voting tendency in the follow up question. Another was whether one volunteered regularly for any kind of work or public service. In another section, a similar question was asked if the respondent considered themselves, politically active or involved in the betterment of their community. Respondents would answer positive for one question and negative for the other. A clearer distinction should have been made as to the difference between the two questions or just eliminate one.

In some cases, questions pertinent to the final analysis were left unanswered. This was particularly prevalent in the section on the practicing of a faith or spiritual system. For example, half of the respondents did not answer the question on how frequently they attended a place of worship. This impacted their ability to answer the question on whether their faith leader talked about the death penalty.

Question #20 (How, if at all, do your religious/spiritual/philosophical beliefs shape your views about the death penalty?) elicited comments that made it difficult to group. It may have been better to ask “Does your religious/spiritual/philosophical beliefs shape your views about the death penalty?”) Subset categories such as “Very much”, “Somewhat” or “Not at all” would have captured individual sentiments more effectively.

In future listening projects, interviewers need to understand more clearly why certain questions (and their answers) are important to the project.

Survey Questions

In addition to personal information on education, income and age, respondents were asked a number of questions regarding their relationship to law and justice issues, their thoughts on capital punishment, their faith, spiritual beliefs or philosophic system and political involvement.

Examples of questions:

When there is publicity (television, radio or newspaper coverage) about someone being sentenced to death or on death row, would you follow the story?

yes, always usually sometimes infrequently rarely never

and

Do you believe that the death sentence is applied equally and fairly to persons based upon the crime committed, independent of factors like economic status/class, race, age/sex of defendant, age/sex of victim?

yes no not sure **IF NO or UNSURE, what are your concerns?**

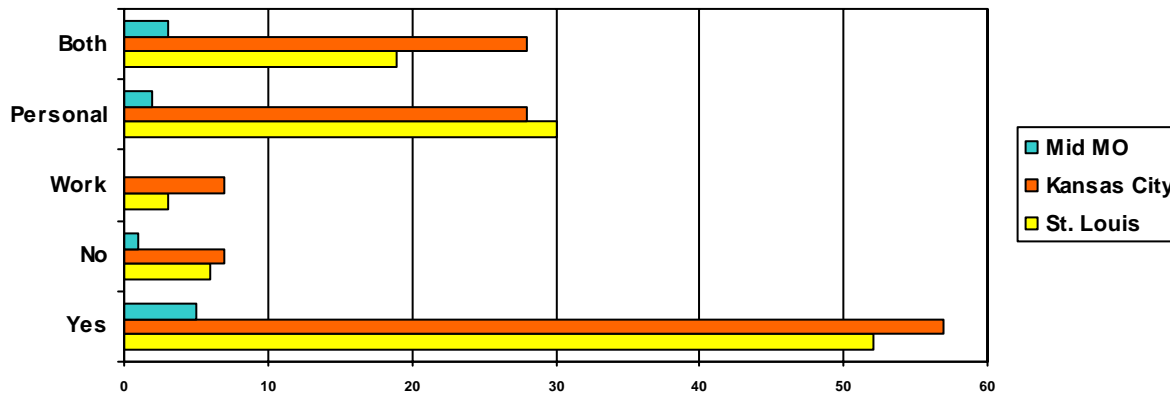
The complete survey is part of the appendix.

Demographics

- Gender: There were 124 total respondents, 69 of which are female, 55 males
- Age: 18% are from 18-24 years old ; 32% are from 25-34 years old ; 23% are from 35-50 years old; 18% are 50-65 years; and 7% were 65 years and older
- Employment: 59% of respondents are employed full time; 10% are employed part time; 7% are unemployed' 4% are unemployed; 10% are full time students
- Educational Background: 12% completed high school; 44% had some college; 26 % had a college degree; 15% has post graduate degrees
- Income: 25% earned \$25,000 or less: 20% earned between \$25-50,000; 13% earned \$50-100,000; 16% chose not to answer the question
- Military Service: The majority of respondents had never served in the military

Time Spent Considering Issues Related to Law & Justice

When asked if they were likely to spend time considering issues relative to law and justice, 90% replied affirmative. This high percentage of time indicates respondents' openness to being informed or motivated by these issues. They were also asked if the time spent on considering these issues were related to work, personal concerns or both.



Respondents were asked about how the following media coverage on the death penalty. The majority indicated that they are tuned in on some level to publicity on capital punishment. This suggests that messaging about involvement in death penalty issues is also likely to be received favorably.

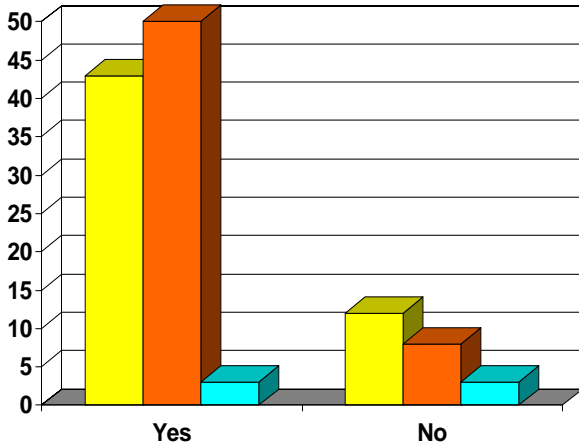
- 12% follow always
- 24% follow usually
- 44% follow sometimes
- 20% follow infrequently, rarely, never

Crime against Respondent and/or Family Members and their Dispositions

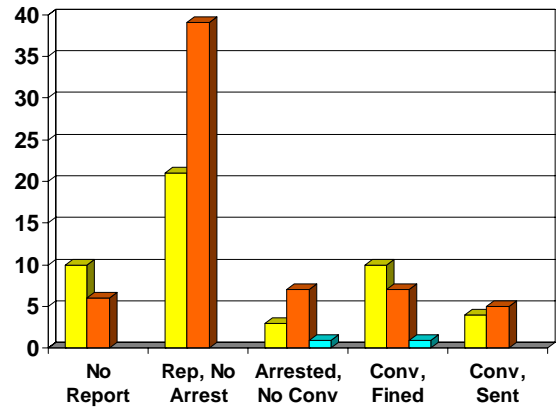
Nearly 80% of respondents or their family members have been victimized by crime. Respondents could select from a menu of crimes from assault to homicide. Below is a graph that illustrates the disposition of those crimes. The numbers of crimes where there were actual convictions are fairly low. Likewise, the disposition of false accusations against the respondent or a family member registered high percentages of low responses by the judicial system, particularly in St. Louis. Such results over a period of time may reflect not only certain attitudes about victimization but also speak to low expectations of the justice system. For the respondent or family, being a victim of a crime did not translate to automatically being in favor of the death penalty.

Unfortunately, this high percentage did not result in high rates of reporting of incidents or favorable dispositions of the crimes. The mistrust of the judicial system could be a significant factor in the low percentage of incident reports.

Victims of Crime?



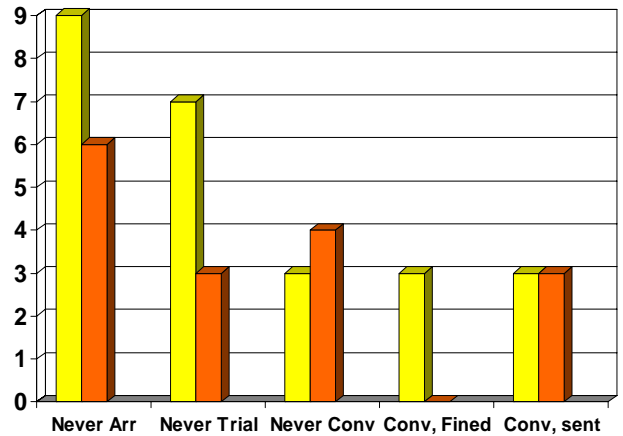
Disposition of Crime Against Victims



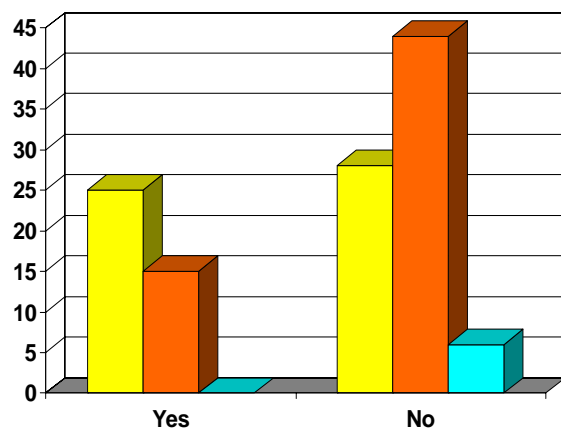
False Crime Accusations of Respondents and/or Family Members and their Dispositions

No Mid-Missouri respondent had ever been falsely accused of a crime. 75% of Kansas City respondents had never been accused of a crime while St. Louis respondents were almost evenly split on those who had been accused of a crime and those who had not. This may be attributed to the nature of the relationship between police and black citizens.

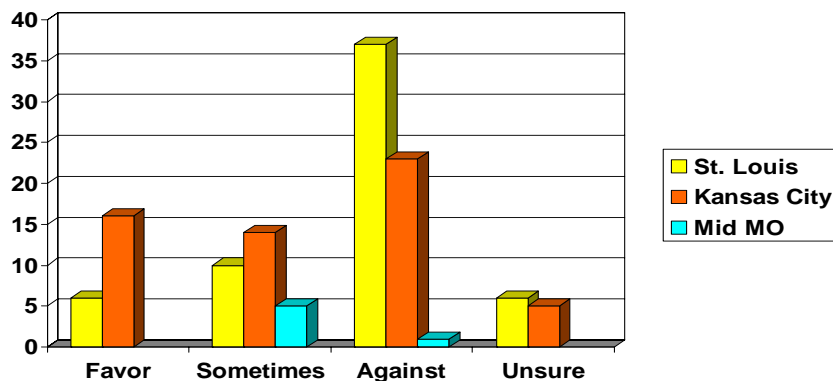
Disposition of False Accusations



Falsely Accused of a Crime



Respondents' Views on the Death Penalty



Of the total number of respondents who shared their views on support of the death penalty, 54% were clearly against the death penalty. Those who were against the death penalty believed that it was unfairly applied or it was in opposition to their belief system.

Those who favored the executions represented 20% of the respondents because of the nature of the crime or felt that the perpetrator needed to take personal responsibility for the crime.

There were about 26% of the respondents who were unsure of the death penalty, or favored it in some cases because the particularities and complexities of the given case.

There were wide disparities between the geographic areas: 63% of St. Louis respondents were opposed to the death penalty compared to only 38% of Kansas City respondents. Only one Mid-Missouri respondent was opposed to executions while the other five favored it in some cases.

Other responses to related questions:

- 90% of the respondents believed that the death penalty is unfairly applied based upon race and/or economic status of the defendant
- 91% percent believed that the death penalty was not a deterrent to crime
- By a 2 to 1 ratio, respondents said their view on the death penalty had not changed in the last ten years; however there were wide variances between the regions. Those who changed their view stated it was due to maturing or to learning more about the issue
- Respondents were almost evenly split on whether forensic technology such as DNA impacted their views on the death penalty

AFSC is unconditionally opposed to the death penalty. However, their main interest in conducting the listening project was to ascertain views and differences so that opportunities for education, mobilizing and working together could be identified.

There are clear differences in the geographic responses that may indicate the stronger opposition to executions in St. Louis is due to a more active abolitionist movement. In fact, 93% of St. Louis respondents were interested in learning the results of the AFSC Listening Project compared to 58% in Kansas City. Only one respondent in Mid-Missouri expressed an interest in the results. Likewise, only 15% of Kansas City respondents (and no Mid-Missourians) stated they wanted to get active with a group who supported their views.

Regardless of the strength of their views on the death penalty, the following facts are worth emphasizing for those interesting in engaging African Americans in the issue:

- African Americans have a definite belief system as it related to their view of the death penalty.
- African Americans are paying attention to death penalty issues.
- African Americans are fundamentally opposed to the death penalty transcends age, gender, class and religious backgrounds.
- There are opportunities for engaging in education/discussion in the faith-based spaces and with political leadership.
- African Americans are politically involved in the electoral process.

Summary of Death Penalty Views

Categories	Oppose	Favor	Favor Some	Answer Total*
Male	55%	20%	25%	49
Female	37%	26%	37%	46
Non College Educated	44%	12%	44%	18
College Educated	56%	20%	24%	93
Democrat	33%	42%	25%	69
Republican	67%	0%	33%	6
Independent	39%	39%	22%	18
No Party Affiliation	31%	49%	20%	45
Ages 18-24 years	55%	15%	30%	20
Ages 25-34 years	69%	18%	13%	38
Ages 35-50 years	59%	19%	22%	27
Ages 50-65 years	57%	24%	19%	21
Ages 60 years +	45%	22%	33%	9
Respondent or family member a victim of crime	52%	17%	22%	96
Always Votes	23%	21%	56%	95

*Represents total numbers who answered the question

The survey findings of African American views on the death penalty are consistent with other research on the attitudes of African Americans on the death Penalty. In 1999, the Center for Social Sciences and Public Policy Research (Southwest Missouri State University) conducted a survey on public opinions about the death. The study found that African-American respondents reported the highest level of opposition to the death penalty. Further, they were most likely to favor alternatives to the death penalty and exhibited the highest degree of concern that more poor and minority defendants are executed. In a more recent study the Pew Center in 2007 found that blacks' opposition to the death penalty (51%) was nearly doubled that of whites (27%).

While African Americans are in general opposition to the death penalty, these numbers are not overwhelming. Most surveys give the range of opposition from 50% to 60% and can vary from state to state. Yet blacks are often preliminary stricken from jury panels because of this perceived staunch opposition. The survey also shows that the African Americans are not a monolithic group, sometimes varying in responses with other similar surveys. Finally, for abolitionists, the report offers proof that a sustained campaign of good messaging and educational activities can improve attitudes about the issue and persuade opposition to the death penalty.

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Appendix

1. Survey Questions
2. Survey Database of Responses
3. PowerPoint Presentation