

9/12/08 Birmingham News (AL) 8
2008 WLNR 17417160

Birmingham News (AL)
Copyright © 2008 Birmingham News. All Rights Reserved.

September 12, 2008

Volume 121
Section: EDITORIAL

Another reason to stay in school

THE ISSUE A new study found another arbitrary element that seems to play a role in who gets executed in America: The inmate's level of education.

One of the chief problems with the death penalty is it is applied so randomly. Many more people are convicted of capital crimes than sentenced to death. Fewer still are executed.

If the outcomes could be traced back to sound, legal reasons, that might be OK. But they're not.

Past research has shown, for instance, that the race of the victim is a key factor in whether a defendant is sentenced to death. Even when adjusted to account for the scary particulars of the crime and the defendant, the victims' skin color played a role in which defendants were sent to Death Row.

Now comes a new study that offers more evidence of arbitrary factors affecting who lives and who dies in our system of justice.

Researchers at Texas A&M University designed an artificial intelligence computer system to try to predict who among those sentenced to Death Row would actually be put to death. The results were curious, and disturbing.

The study used profiles from 2,000 Death Row inmates, including such information as race, gender, age, type of offense and criminal history. Gender was the biggest predictor of who would be put to death; women make up only a tiny fraction of Death Row and are seldom executed.

Otherwise, the chief factor was how many years defendants had spent in high school.

Granted, the data don't include some pretty relevant information, like whether the defendants had good legal representation at their trials or DNA testing of evidence.

But the frightening fact remains, the computer can predict who on Death Row will be executed - with more than 90 percent accuracy - based on facts so arbitrary as the defendant's level of education.

Those who are inclined can try to come up with theories about why Death Row inmates with less education would be more likely to be executed. But it's hard to imagine hitting on a theory that would attest to our justice system's fundamental fairness.

Professors Stamos Karamouzis and Dee Wood Harper, who conducted the Texas A&M study, certainly didn't think so. "The results pose a serious challenge to the fairness of the administration of the death penalty," they wrote.

Life and death decisions in our court system should at the very least be based on relevant facts, such as the horror of a particular crime and the guilt of a particular defendant. Instead, they seem to boil down to such irrelevancies as race, wealth, gender and, yes, education.

That's just wrong.

You can call it whatever you want. But it's not justice.

---- Index References ----

News Subject: (Social Issues (ISO05); Crime (ICR87); Death Penalty (IDE04))

Region: (Texas (ITE14); North America (INO39); Americas (IAM92); USA (1US73))

Language: EN

Other Indexing: (PROFESSORS STAMOS KARAMOUZIS) (Dee Wood Harper; Fewer; Granted; Life; Past)

Word Count: 522

End of Document

© 2016 Thomson Reuters. No claim to original U.S. Government Works.

NewsRoom