

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/ending-the-death-penalty-is-a-step-toward-racial-justice>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Last year, after a 17-year hiatus, the U.S. Department of Justice [resumed](#) federal executions. Between July 14, 2020 and January 16, 2021, the federal government executed 13 people [three times as many people](#) in that six-month period than had been executed during the previous six decades.

Throughout the country's history, the death penalty has been carried out in a racist manner, demonstrating what many people already know: white lives are valued more than Black lives. People convicted of killing white people are [17 times more likely](#) to receive the death penalty than if those killed were Black—a clear indicator of a system set up to protect and serve white interests. Only [13 percent](#) of the U.S. population is Black, but Black people make up [42 percent](#) of people on death row at the state level and 41 percent of those on federal death row.

And too often, judges and juries make mistakes with deadly consequences. Since 1973, 185 people have been [exonerated](#) for wrongful convictions that sent them to death row. Almost two-thirds of those are people of color—99 Black people, 16 Latinx people, and one Native American person—groups most exploited by the U.S. criminal legal system.

The U.S. is also an outlier globally: [more than 70 percent](#) of countries worldwide have abolished capital punishment in law or practice, including roughly [170 United Nations member states](#). Although [25 U.S. states](#) have formally ended the death penalty or enacted a moratorium on its use (with [Virginia](#) soon to be the 26th), the federal government has not done so yet—another example of how this country fails to reckon with white supremacy and the legacy of slavery. Congress and President Biden can set a path forward for states to follow by abolishing the federal death penalty.

Vera is joining the fight to end this draconian, racist practice. Vera has endorsed two pieces of legislation to abolish the federal death penalty: [H.R. 262](#), the Federal Death Penalty Prohibition Act, introduced by Senator Dick Durbin (D-IL) and Representative Ayanna Pressley (D-MA); and [H.R. 97](#), the Federal Death Penalty Abolition Act of 2021, introduced by Representative Adriano Espaillat (D-NY). If this legislation is enacted, the government will not put anyone else to death for a violation of federal law and will resentence people already sentenced to death. Moreover, neither bill calls for automatic resentencing to life without parole, another excessive and inhumane practice that perpetuates [serious racial disparities](#).

Vera [joins](#) a coalition of 82 civil rights and advocacy organizations that have asked Biden to fulfill his campaign promise to end federal executions. Even if Congress does not act, Biden can take executive actions that do not require legislative approval, such as issuing a moratorium on federal executions and dismantling the federal death chamber at the Federal Correctional Complex, Terre Haute.

Ending mass incarceration requires that this country quell its obsession with retribution. Vera stands with the broader justice community to demand abolition of the death penalty. Righting this most basic of racial injustices cannot wait any longer.

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