

Economics of Capital Punishment

Gary Becker

2004

- Posner provides a good discussion of the various issues related to capital punishment
- Becker: concentrate my comments on **deterrence**, which is really the crucial issue in the debate over capital punishment.

Deterrence

- I support the use of capital punishment for persons convicted of murder because, and only because, I believe it deters murders.
- If I did not believe that, I would be opposed because revenge and the other possible motives ... should not be a basis for **public policy**.

- Serious empirical research on capital punishment began with Isaac Ehrlich's pioneering paper.
- The available data are quite limited, however, so one should not base any conclusions solely on the econometric evidence.

Cannot wait

- Still, I believe the preponderance of evidence does indicate that capital punishment deters.
- Of course, public policy on punishments **cannot wait** until the evidence is perfect.

Other considerations

- Opponents of capital punishment frequently proclaim that the State has no moral right to take the life of anyone ...
- Of course I am worried about the risk of executing innocent persons for murders committed by others.
- To repeat, the capital punishment debate comes down in essentials to a debate over deterrence.