



The Impact of the Death Penalty on Families of People Sentenced to Death: Objective 5

Submitted by The Advocates for Human Rights

a non-governmental organization in special consultative status with ECOSOC since 1996

Floridians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty

Libérons Mumia

The Taiwan Alliance to End the Death Penalty

International Federation for Human Rights

and

The World Coalition Against the Death Penalty

in response to the Call for input by the Special Rapporteur on summary, extrajudicial or arbitrary executions: The death penalty from the perspective of the prohibition against torture and other forms of ill-treatment and the protection of human dignity

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The Advocates for Human Rights (The Advocates) is a volunteer-based non-governmental organization committed to the impartial promotion and protection of international human rights standards and the rule of law since its founding in 1983. The Advocates conducts a range of programs to promote human rights in the United States and around the world, including monitoring and fact finding, direct legal representation, education and training, and publication. The Advocates is the primary provider of legal services to low-income asylum seekers in the Upper Midwest region of the United States. The Advocates is committed to ensuring human rights protection for women around the world. The Advocates has published more than 25 reports on violence against women as a human rights issue, provided consultation and commentary of draft laws on domestic violence, and trained lawyers, police, prosecutors, judges, and other law enforcement personnel to effectively implement new and existing laws on domestic violence. In 1991, The Advocates adopted a formal commitment to oppose the death penalty worldwide and organized a death penalty project to provide pro bono assistance on post-conviction appeals, as well as education and advocacy to end capital punishment. The Advocates currently holds a seat on the Steering Committee of the World Coalition against the Death Penalty.

The World Coalition Against the Death Penalty is a membership-based global network committed to strengthening the international dimension of the fight against the death penalty. Established in 2002, its ultimate objective is to obtain the universal abolition of the death penalty. To achieve its goal, the World Coalition advocates for a definitive end to death sentences and executions in those countries where the death penalty is in force. In some countries, it is seeking to obtain a reduction in the use of capital punishment as a first step towards abolition.

Floridians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty works for restorative justice in the form of effective alternatives to the death penalty. FADP works to build and mobilize public and political support for abolition using a coordinated, strategic, and empowerment-oriented approach incorporating a broad network of individual Floridians, murder victims' family members and other

survivors of violent crime, law enforcement professionals, families of the incarcerated, and death row exonerees.

The Taiwan Alliance to End the Death Penalty (TAEDP) is the first coalition in Taiwan dedicated to abolishing the death penalty and promoting reform of the criminal justice system. Established in 2003, it brings together abolitionist groups, NGOs, and research institutes. TAEDP works on individual capital cases, monitors trial procedures to safeguard fair trial rights, and campaigns to prevent wrongful executions. The organization also provides training and seminars for criminal defense lawyers. Beyond capital punishment, TAEDP advocates for victims' rights and stronger support systems for those affected by serious crimes. It engages the public through forums, seminars, and educational programs developed in collaboration with teachers.

The **International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)** is an international human rights NGO that unites 188 member organizations from 116 countries. Since its foundation in 1922, FIDH has been defending all civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

The French Collective **LET'S FREE MUMIA (Libérons Mumia)** brings together around one hundred organizations and public authorities, including the capital Paris.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. This report responds to Objective 5 of the Special Rapporteur’s call for input, which asks for information on the impact—including mental and physical consequences—of the death penalty on families of people sentenced to death.

The death penalty results in severe mental and physical consequences for family members of people sentenced to death.

Trauma

2. Clinical research shows that family members of people sentenced to death experience complex trauma, including post-traumatic stress disorder, and that they rarely receive recognition and treatment for such trauma.¹ One clinical study found that 11 of 12 family members had major depression and all 12 had symptoms consistent with PTSD.² Studies also show that some children of people under sentence of death have PTSD.³ Studies have also found that family members “experience ‘anticipatory grief’ over an extended period of time and the emotional whiplash of hopes raised and dashed and then raised again, sometimes several times in succession.”⁴ Researchers also describe “disenfranchised grief,” wherein the larger society denies family members “the ‘right to grieve,’” creating obstacles to healing, such as barriers to seeking therapeutic treatment.⁵
3. The complexity of family trauma is captured in a statement from the three sisters of Michael Zack, whom the State of Florida executed in 2023: “still, our love for him endures. With his execution, our family faces another irrevocable and profound loss.”⁶
4. The Abdorrahman Boroumand Center for Human Rights in Iran has interviewed and documented the experiences of many family members of people whom Iranian authorities have executed:
 - The wife of a man whom Iranian authorities executed subsequently described severe depression as well as the trauma her children have experienced since the execution. Their four-year-old daughter has “nervous disorders” and “heart problems” and their six-year-old son is nervous and bites his fingernails.⁷

¹ See, e.g., Texas After Violence Project, *Nobody To Talk To: Barriers to Mental Health Treatment for Family Members of Individuals Sentenced to Death or Executed* (2019), accessed Feb. 25, 2026, https://afterviolenceproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/TAVP_Nobody-to-Talk-To_Report.pdf.

² *Id.* at 2-3.

³ Attari, A., Dashty, S., and Mahmoodi, M., *Post-traumatic stress disorder in children witnessing a public hanging in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, *La Revenue de Santé de Méditerranée orientale*, 12 (1-2), 72-80 (2006). See also World Coalition Against the Death Penalty, “The Rights of Children Whose Parents Have Been Sentenced to Death or Executed Detailed Factsheet” (2019), https://worldcoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/WD2019DetailedFactsheet_EN-1.pdf.

⁴ Texas After Violence Project, *supra* note 1, at 4 (citations omitted).

⁵ *Id.* at 5.

⁶ Lil Mama, TT, and Tish, *Sisters of Michael Zack Release Statement on Brother’s Execution*, Floridians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty, Oct. 3, 2023, <https://www.fadp.org/statements-on-the-execution-of-michael-zack/>.

⁷ See also *گفتند قاچاقچی موادند اما پول طناب نرم نداشتند* (*They said they were drug smugglers but they didn’t have the money for a soft rope*), *Iran Wire*, Sep. 14, 2025,

- The sister of a man who had been executed described the chaos the family experienced after his arrest, and reported that after authorities executed her brother “I left my home for eight months because I could not stay. My spouse no longer mattered to me, nor did my children. No one and nothing mattered to me.” She further explained that their mother “cannot accept that he was executed and has died.”
 - A woman whose husband had been executed explained, “I feel like I’ve gone mad. No one can talk to me, and no one dares to. I always want to be alone in a room by myself. . . . I still haven’t been able to accept his death. I truly don’t know how I can raise my children.” She explained that their daughter “is in a very severe psychological state. She is constantly crying and wants to go to her father’s grave.”
 - The sister of a Kurdish man who was executed in 2017 reported that she “became seriously ill after my brother’s execution. I was hospitalized three times in a single week. Right now, I cannot sleep or speak if I don’t take pills. I’m undergoing psychological treatment. I was the one who suffered the most; no one endured the psychological torture that I did; I can’t even talk to my own kid anymore and I hit her.”⁸
 - A man who lived in Europe whose brother had been executed said that after learning of the execution he passed out, and now he cries uncontrollably every time he hears of an execution. He was prescribed medication and was treated by a psychologist for a year, initially going to therapy three times per week. He said that fear had “taken root in me.”⁹
 - The wife of a man who had been executed had taken their young daughter for monthly prison visits, but after authorities executed him, she didn’t know how to tell her daughter. A classmate ultimately told the girl, and she became upset and angry, threatening self-harm.¹⁰
5. World Day Against the Death Penalty in 2023 focused on the link between the death penalty and torture. Several testimonies highlighted the trauma that the death penalty causes for families.¹¹

<https://iranwire.com/fa/features/133899-%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%A8%D9%84%D9%88%DA%86%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%86-%DA%AF%D9%81%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%AF-%D9%82%D8%A7%DA%86%D8%A7%D9%82%DA%86%DB%8C-%D9%85%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%86%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%A7-%D9%BE%D9%88%D9%84-%D8%B7%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D9%86%D8%B1%D9%85-%D9%86%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B4%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%AF/>.

⁸ Abdorrahman Boroumand Center, “*Our Family Fell Apart after my Brother’s Execution*”: *Witness Testimony of the Sister of a Kurdish Man Put to Death*, Nov. 12, 2020, <https://www.iranrights.org/library/document/3793>.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Abdorrahman Boroumand Center, *One Execution, a Lifetime of Torture: Witness Statement of Serveh Mahmudzadeh*, Aug. 10, 2018, <https://www.iranrights.org/library/document/3444>.

¹¹ World Coalition Against the Death Penalty, *21st World Day Against the Death Penalty: Testimonies: Torture and the Death Penalty*, 10 Oct. 2023, https://worldcoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/TestimoniesJM_EN-08-07.pdf (see, e.g., Anonymous, sister of man executed in Iran, at 8-9; Angelia Selvam, sister of a Malaysian man sentenced to death in Singapore who has since been executed, at 11).

6. A member of the World Coalition Against the Death Penalty based in Tanzania reports that families of people sentenced to death experience “severe psychological, social, and economic impacts,” including “prolonged emotional distress and trauma due to uncertainty surrounding executions and the indefinite detention of their relatives on death row.”
7. The trial itself can cause trauma. The Taiwan Alliance to End the Death Penalty (TAEDP) monitored a capital trial during which the defendant’s wife and children “experienced such severe psychological stress that the lawyers asked us to help arrange social worker and counseling resources for them.”

Restrictions on visitation

8. Families frequently had minimal contact with their relatives on death row.¹² Death row is typically characterized by stricter, maximum-security detention, and “visiting rights on death rows are frequently limited,” with visits often subject to searches, no physical contact, supervision, and other precautionary measures.¹³ These restrictions can be detrimental to the best interests of the child, particularly when it is in the child’s best interest to maintain direct contact with parents during separation.
9. Many jurisdictions subject people under sentence of death to prolonged solitary confinement (up to 23 hours per day), severely limit family visits (sometimes to only minutes per year), prohibit physical contact (including with children), and impose humiliating search procedures on visitors, causing ongoing distress, disrupting family bonds, imposing financial/logistical burdens, and prolonging anticipatory grief.¹⁴
10. Death row conditions and visitation restrictions can exacerbate family distress: the son of a woman on death row in Japan reports needing to travel long distances for brief, surveilled visits of only twenty minutes, with an officer present and a camera filming.¹⁵
11. The Centre d’Observation des Droits de l’Homme et d’Assistance Sociale (CODHAS), based in the Democratic Republic of Congo, reports that people sentenced to death in the DRC live in high-security prisons in inaccessible locations and that visits are either not allowed, or allowed only with payment.
12. Mr. Mumia Abu-Jamal, who spent 29 years on death row in Pennsylvania (USA), describes his physical isolation from his loved ones as a separation from the people who naturally care about you. According to him, the goal is to dehumanize people sentenced to death by depriving them of what is essential to being human and their social nature.¹⁶

Failure to notify families in advance of the execution

¹² See generally, World Coalition Against the Death Penalty, *In Their Own Words: Children of Parents Sentenced to Death or Executed* (2019), accessed Feb. 25, 2025, https://worldcoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/WD2019Temoignages_EN-1.pdf.

¹³ World Coalition Against the Death Penalty, “The Rights of Children Whose Parents Have Been Sentenced to Death or Executed Detailed Factsheet” (2019), https://worldcoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/WD2019DetailedFactsheet_EN-1.pdf.

¹⁴ Death Penalty Information Center, “Human Rights and Confinement on U.S. Death Rows,” accessed Feb. 10, 2026, <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/policy-issues/policy/human-rights/human-rights-and-confinement-on-u-s-death-rows>.

¹⁵ World Coalition Against the Death Penalty, *In Their Own Words*, *supra* note 12, at 8–9.

¹⁶ Submission by Mr. Mumia ABU-JAMAL to the United Nations, Libérons Mumia, Feb. 2025, 1.

13. The Supreme Court of India has laid down guidelines to be followed prior to execution, including providing individuals and their family members with sufficient prior notice of the date and time of execution, to enable the individual to prepare mentally and to meet their family for one last time.¹⁷ In some countries, however, authorities do not provide family members with clarity about upcoming execution dates.¹⁸
14. The Abdorrahman Boroumand Center for Human Rights in Iran interviewed family members of T.N., whom Iranian authorities executed in September 2025. No official notified the family in advance of the execution, and afterward the family received “only a brief phone call instructing them to ‘come and collect the body.’”
15. The European Saudi Organization for Human Rights (ESOHR), a member of the World Coalition Against the Death Penalty based in Europe, reports that Saudi authorities deny families of people sentenced to death “the right to say goodbye prior to execution.”
16. TAEDP similarly reports that in Taiwan, neither the person on death row, nor their attorney, nor their family members receive prior notification of the execution, “and therefore families are unable to see [their loved one] for the last time before the execution.” In January 2025, for example, “[o]nly about nine hours elapsed from the [Death Penalty Execution Review Committee]’s decision to execute Huang Lin-kai to carrying out the execution.”¹⁹

Politicization of executions

17. In Alabama, Dr. Chris Brown’s father received an execution date in 2002 that the U.S. Supreme Court stayed. After an unsuccessful clemency hearing under Alabama’s new governor, authorities executed Dr. Brown’s father in April 2003. Dr. Brown’s family waited that day for news of any relief, but it never came; he said: “We felt like pawns in a political game.”²⁰
18. In Florida, despite pleas from both Curtis Windom’s family and his victims’ families, Governor DeSantis proceeded with the execution of Mr. Windom and celebrated it on Twitter. Floridians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty stated: “Governor DeSantis does not speak for all victims’ families. Tonight’s execution wasn’t about justice. It was about flexing political muscle.”²¹

Other cruel practices

19. The Abdorrahman Boroumand Center for Human Rights in Iran has interviewed family members of people whom Iranian authorities have executed and has learned that people sentenced to death or their families “may be required to pay a ‘rope fee’ for their own hanging.” A prison guard told the Center that the fee was 30 million toman, or the equivalent of \$303

¹⁷ Amnesty International India, *Oct 10, World Day against Death Penalty: India Must Commute Death Sentences Of All Prisoners at Risk of Execution* (Oct. 9, 2013), <https://www.amnesty.org/es/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/asa200552013en.pdf>.

¹⁸ See generally, World Coalition Against the Death Penalty, Detailed Factsheet, *supra* note 13; World Coalition Against the Death Penalty, *In Their Own Words*, *supra* note 12.

¹⁹ Covenants Watch, *2025 Parallel Report in Response to the 2022 Concluding Observations (3rd) [and] the 2025 State Reports on the ICCPR & ICESCR (4th)*, Oct. 2025, ¶ 212, <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1PYFGrQJg7sRy6-Jt1EVAwXG5X-MeJz-->.

²⁰ World Coalition Against the Death Penalty, *In Their Own Words*, *supra* note 12, at 10.

²¹ Floridians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty, *Statement on the Execution of Curtis Windom* (Aug. 28, 2025), <https://www.fadp.org/statement-on-the-execution-of-curtis-windom/>.

US. The Center documented that the families of T.N. and B.O. were required to pay a rope fee in 2025.

20. Authorities gave the wife of a Baluch man executed in 2025 two options: “a soft rope for a fee or a hard rope for free.” She could not afford the fee and when she retrieved her husband’s body, she saw that his “neck appeared as if a ‘knife had cut his throat’ and was broken, along with his arm.” The Center observes that this fee “compounds the psychological distress faced by both [the people sentenced to death] and their family members.”²²

Stigma and marginalization

21. The Abdorrahman Boroumand Center for Human Rights in Iran further notes that social stigma related to the alleged offenses “further isolates families from the very community needed to move on and rebuild their lives.” According to CODHAS, communities may be divided and people may harbor a spirit of vengeance against the family members of the person sentenced to death.
22. TAEDP reports that in Taiwan, communities hold resentment not only toward the person sentenced to death, but also toward that person’s family, harboring the “belief that the family should bear responsibility for ‘raising a bad person.’” After a criminal incident, the media track down the family “and expect them to apologize in front of the cameras.” Due to this stigma and targeting, families are forced to move away from their home communities and to conceal their identities. According to TAEDP, “[s]everal minor children of [people on] death row [with] whom we have worked . . . have worried at school that others might discover their identity.”
23. A death sentence and/or execution can impose tremendous financial burdens: blood money, loss of income, attorney’s fees, and funeral costs.²³ The Abdorrahman Boroumand Center documented cases in Iran where surviving families faced homelessness, forced emigration, and inability to afford medical care.²⁴
24. Children can be particularly vulnerable to stigma and marginalization. Homan Mousavi, born in an Iranian prison where he lived until his mother was executed, faced neglect, poverty and ongoing government surveillance as a result of his parents’ executions, had to sign a pledge to refrain from political activity before being permitted to study at university, was forced to sign a letter to avoid any political activity in order to study at university, and while in state custody was repeatedly threatened with execution being told: “We’re going to execute you like your parents.”²⁵ Studies across the globe including India, Bangladesh and Pennsylvania, reflect death row individuals are disproportionately economically vulnerable and/or racial minorities.²⁶

²² See also *They said they were drug smugglers but they didn’t have the money for a soft rope*, *supra* note 7.

²³ Abdorrahman Boroumand Ctr. for Human Rights in Iran, Inputs - Report of the Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary, or Arbitrary Executions on the Impact of the Death Penalty (Apr. 29, 2022), p. 2.

²⁴ Abdorrahman Boroumand Ctr. for Human Rights in Iran, Inputs - Report of the Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary, or Arbitrary Executions on the Impact of the Death Penalty (Apr. 29, 2022), pp. 2-3.

²⁵ World Coalition Against the Death Penalty, *In Their Own Words*, *supra* note 12, at 5. Authorities arrested and tortured Mousavi for his involvement in the Green Movement.

²⁶ Secretary-General, Question of the Death Penalty, U.N. Doc. A/HRC/48/29 (Dec. 17, 2021), ¶ 51, <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/48/29>.

25. Stigma can persist across generations.²⁷ In Belarus, Aliaksandra (Sasha) Yakavitskaya, whose father was sentenced to death and executed, described harmful comments she read on the Internet saying her four-year-old daughter should also be executed because she has the same genes as Sasha's father.²⁸ Such stigma makes families unlikely to seek help.²⁹ For World Day 2019, the World Coalition collected testimonies of children like Ms. Yakavitskaya whose parents had been executed.³⁰
26. An Iranian woman whose father was executed when she was nine years old described her persistent fear of being disrespected and judged, avoidance of conflict to prevent peers from invoking the parent's execution as a slur, and the lasting social burden carried "like a secret."³¹
27. A Ugandan girl described collective punishment dynamics after her father's death sentence; villagers destroyed and stole family property, sought out family members to kill them, labeled all relatives "murderers," and forced children out of school.³²
28. A member of the World Coalition Against the Death Penalty based in Tanzania reports that families experience "[s]ocial stigma" and "isolation and discrimination within communities." Families also "bear significant [economic] burdens related to legal costs, prison visits, and loss of income, particularly where the sentenced person was a primary provider."
29. CODHAS reports that due to loss of income from the parent sentenced to death, families struggle to care for dependent children, who are sometimes recruited by armed groups or exposed to sexual exploitation.

Trauma specific to family members of people sentenced to death for killing other family members

30. When a criminal legal system sentences a person to death for killing a family member, the family of the victim often overlaps with the family of the person sentenced to death. These family members face a particular form of trauma related to their dual status, and criminal legal systems often cause additional trauma with the death penalty.
31. For example, in 2025 the State of Florida executed Curtis Windom for killing his wife, mother-in-law, and best friend. State authorities exploited the family members, asserting contrary to the evidence that it was "a great relief to victims' families when accountability is finally administered."³³ As Floridians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty reported, "[m]embers of all three victims' families, including Curtis' daughter, who lost her mother and grandmother at the hands of her father, have adamantly opposed this execution for decades."³⁴ In a joint statement, the victims' families recounted their experiences in the lead-up to the execution: "30 days ago, the State of Florida began contacting our family excitedly asking if we would like to witness Curtis' execution. When we said no, and that we had, in fact, spent many years

²⁷ Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions, Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions, U.N. Doc. A/77/270 (Aug. 5, 2022), ¶ 87, <https://docs.un.org/en/A/77/270>.

²⁸ World Coalition Against the Death Penalty, *In Their Own Words*, *supra* note 12, at 9.

²⁹ Taiwan All. to End the Death Penalty, Submission by the Taiwan Alliance to End the Death Penalty (Apr. 28, 2022), ¶ 12.

³⁰ World Coalition Against the Death Penalty, *In Their Own Words*, *supra* note 12.

³¹ *Id.* at 6-7.

³² *Id.* at 16-17.

³³ Floridians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty, *supra* note 21.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

advocating against the very thing we were now being asked to come and watch, we were told that there was nothing we could do to stop it from going forward. The victims' advocate told us that she 'had a job to do,' and that she could offer us therapy after an unnecessary trauma that none of us asked for."³⁵

32. In certain jurisdictions applying *qisas* (retribution in kind) systems under an interpretation of Islamic law, including in Iran, children face an additional traumatic burden: deciding whether their surviving parent should be executed for killing their other parent. This situation arises particularly in cases involving survivors of gender-based violence who kill their abusers.³⁶ In other words, a child who witnessed their father carry out long-term abuse of their mother must decide whether their mother should die for killing him. In Iran, authorities sometimes call on children to carry out the execution themselves,³⁷ compounding this trauma.

³⁵ Floridians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty, *Statement from the Relatives and Friends of Mary Lubin, Valerie Davis, and Johnny Lee*, Aug. 28, 2025, <https://www.fadp.org/statement-on-the-execution-of-curtis-windom/>.

³⁶ See Penal Reform International, *Would abolition of the death penalty be unfaithful to the message of Islam?* (2015), <https://cdn.penalreform.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Sharia-law-and-the-death-penalty.pdf>.

³⁷ Iran Human Rights, *Juvenile Offenders Executed in 2023* (Mar. 14, 2024), <https://iranhr.net/en/articles/6618/>.