

Blacks who kill whites most likely to be executed, study finds

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In the United States, blacks convicted of killing whites are not only more likely than other killers to get a death sentence, they're also likely to actually be executed, a new study suggests. The chances of being condemned and of being put to death are quite different, as less than 10 percent of those given the death sentence ever get executed, said David Jacobs, co-author of the study. Most of the others have their sentences overturned on appeal, he explained. Execution chamber in San Quentin State Prison, Calif., where death row inmates die by lethal injection. (Image courtesy Calif. Dept. of Corrections & Rehabilitation)

The new finding suggests our justice system places greater value on white lives, even after sentences are handed down, added Jacobs, a sociology professor at Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio. This apparently is the first study to examine whether the race of murder victims affects the probability that a convicted killer gets the ultimate punishment, Jacobs said. The findings appear in the August issue of the research journal *American Sociological Review*. The study examined outcomes of 1,560 people sentenced to death in 16 states from 1973 to 2002. These 16 states were chosen because they had the complete data that the researchers needed for the study. A black who killed a white person has twice the risk of being executed than a white person who killed a non-white, he said. "The fact that blacks who kill non-whites actually are less likely to be executed than blacks who kill whites shows there is a strong racial bias here," Jacobs said. "Blacks are most likely to pay the ultimate price when their victims are white." Hispanic whites who killed whites were also more likely to be executed than were whites who killed non-whites, the study found. But the risk of execution was not as strong for Hispanics who killed whites as they were for blacks who killed whites. The study also reinforced previous findings by Jacobs that the likelihood of a legal death penalty was greater in states with higher proportions of black residents, an ideologically more conservative population, and in states where there was greater support for Republican candidates. In the new research, Jacobs found that execution probabilities increase in states along with the population of African-Americans, up to a point. But when the population of blacks reaches about 16 percent of the population, executions start to decrease. Probably at that point, African-Americans have enough votes and political influence within a state to reduce the number of executions, Jacobs said.

Courtesy Ohio State University and World Science staff