



## Criminal Justice Reform

Ours should be a just and compassionate society committed to ensuring the safety and protection of our communities while encouraging the merciful forgiveness and rehabilitation of criminal offenders. We support reform to the state's criminal justice system that ends the death penalty, provides for the compassionate treatment of prisoners, and encourages rehabilitation and forgiveness for those re-entering society.

The adage "a chain is only as strong as its weakest link" comes to mind when considering the effects of criminal behavior and society's response to it. The common good is undermined by criminal behavior that threatens the lives and dignity of others and by policies that give up on those who have broken the law. We are called to show compassion and mercy to all, including those who are incarcerated. Our individual humanity is strengthened or weakened by how we, as a society, treat those who most need merciful justice.

Like all affronts to the dignity of life, the death penalty diminishes humanity. Church teaching on the life and dignity of every

human person should guide all our decisions about life, including the use of the death penalty. Furthermore, research shows that we cannot reduce crime by executing criminals and simple logic tells us the lives of the innocent are not restored by ending the lives of those convicted of their murders. We are called to reflect on what the Lord's command, "You shall not kill" (Ex 20:13) means for us today.

The current criminal justice system has both the tools for life imprisonment without execution and has significant flaws in sentencing practices that undermine the ability for the public to trust that every convicted person on death row in Texas is actually guilty. A capitol jury has a

As a Church we accompany our brothers and sisters, children, parents and loved ones as we see them suffer from the heinous and violent actions of others." -- *Capital Punishment: The death penalty does not fulfill justice*, Texas Catholic Conference of Bishops, 2016

tremendous burden of determining whether an inmate lives or dies. Jurors carry the weight of this decision and its impact for the rest of their lives.

In the upcoming legislative session, we can improve the rights of jurors serving in death penalty sentencing cases. Texas law is intentionally misleading as it requires judges and attorneys to lie to jurors about the level

## Where we stand

The TCCB has reviewed the following legislation for the 85th Texas Legislature:



**HB 50** allows judges to assign community service to reduce or eliminate fines for low-income offenders. The TCCB supports this bill to show financial mercy and better enable offenders to rehabilitate.



**HB 64** repeals the use of the death penalty in Texas while still allowing life without parole. The TCCB supports this bill to end the use of the death penalty.



**HB 72** allows victim-offender mediation for first time offenders in misdemeanor or state jail felony cases for both juveniles and adults. The TCCB supports this bill which creates new for restorative justice opportunities.



**HB 86** allows for a tax refund or tax credit for businesses who hire employees who are former criminal offenders. The TCCB supports this bill which provides incentives for employers who assist in the entry of former offenders.



**HB 122**, a “raise the age” bill, changes the ages for a juvenile to 18 in order to comply with Supreme Court decisions. The TCC supports this bill to reform juvenile justice processes in Texas.

of unanimity required for a death sentence. The Texas bishops will be supporting efforts to revise capital jury sentencing instructions to prevent this concealment of juror’s individual capacity to impose a sentence less than death. While we will continue our efforts to end the use of the death penalty in Texas, this legislation will at least improve the fairness of the current system.



**HB 147** prohibits the use of the death penalty when the person is convicted solely through the law of parities. The TCCB supports this bill which prevents the use of the death penalty against persons who did not personally commit murder.



**HB 239** requires reporting from jails regarding the implementation of policies for adequate care to pregnant prisoners. The TCC supports this bill to improve care to pregnant women confined in jail.



**HB 269** would allow individuals who have been convicted of prostitution to have their records sealed if a court finds that the person was a victim of human trafficking or compelled into prostitution. The TCCB supports this bill because it seeks to restore the dignity of human trafficking victims.



**HB 316** prohibits the imposition of the capital punishment upon defendants found guilty of helping another person commit a capital felony. The TCCB supports this bill because we oppose the imposition of the death penalty upon defendants who did not themselves commit a capital offense, and opposes the imposition of capital punishment.

You can find more information on the Texas Conference of Catholic Bishops’ policy priorities at [www.txcatholic.org/public-policy](http://www.txcatholic.org/public-policy).