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New Report Documents the Racist Roots of Missouri's Death Penalty and the Impact of Race Today

Missouri was One of Only Five States that Carried Out Executions in 2023

(Washington, D.C.) Today, the Death Penalty Information Center (DPIC) released a report that documents how racial bias and violence affected the past use of the death penalty in Missouri and how that history continues to influence the current administration of capital punishment in the state. Missouri was only one of five states to carry out executions in 2023 and did not impose any death sentences this year, according to a separate, national year-end report also released today by DPIC.

Read "Compromised Justice: How A Legacy of Racial Violence Informs Missouri's Death Penalty Today" here: <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/facts-and-research/dpic-reports/dpic-special-reports/compromised-justice-how-a-legacy-of-racial-violence-informs-missouris-death-penalty>

Read "The Death Penalty in 2023: Year End Report" here: <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/facts-and-research/dpic-reports/dpic-year-end-reports/the-death-penalty-in-2023-year-end-report>

Missouri is one of a handful of states that has consistently executed people in the last five years. Missouri executed four people this year, including a Black man named Leonard Taylor, whose credible claim of innocence was ignored.

Historically and into the present day, Missouri's death penalty has been applied discriminatorily based on race, according to "Compromised Justice." Before the end of slavery in 1865, enslaved people were at least four times more likely to be executed than white Missourians. More recently, DPIC found there have been 216 death sentences in Missouri since 1972, and 40% have been for Black defendants. By contrast, Black people comprise just under 12% of the total state population.

As "Compromised Justice" documents, the first reported lynching in U.S. history occurred in Missouri in 1838 and at least 60 Black Missourians were killed in this manner, making it the state with the highest number of racial terror lynchings outside the South. After a quadruple execution in St. Louis, a drug store owner displayed the severed head of a Black person who was publicly executed in his shop—a stark example of how racial violence was used to continually intimidate and threaten Black people.

The racial disparities in treatment persist into the present day. For example, DPIC identified 21 capital convictions in Missouri that have been reversed for prosecutorial

misconduct and explains, “While 40% of death sentences have been given to Black defendants, 62% of misconduct reversals or exonerations have been for Black defendants. Three of the four people who have been exonerated from Missouri’s death row are Black men. All three of their cases were marred by official misconduct, with prosecutors withholding favorable evidence and/or relying on false evidence, or police coercing witnesses with incentive.”

Kevin Strickland, a Black man, was tried capitally twice for a crime that he did not commit. After his first trial ended with a deadlocked jury because the only Black juror did not believe he was guilty, the prosecutor admitted that he was “careless” in seating a Black juror and that his “mistake” would not happen again. Mr. Strickland was subsequently convicted and sentenced to life without parole eligibility for at least 50 years by an all-white jury before being exonerated in 2021.

As “Compromised Justice” details, the race of the victim may be the most important factor in prosecutors’ decision-making. One study cited in the report found that Missouri prosecutors were less than half as likely to file a capital charge in cases that involve Black victims compared to cases involving white victims. Another study found that, in Missouri, homicides involving white victims are seven times more likely to result in an execution than those with Black victims. The report explains, “The disparate use of capital punishment for white victims—particularly white female victims—is reminiscent of historical death sentences and lynchings in Missouri.”

“Race has a big impact on whether the death penalty is sought, and if someone facing charges ultimately lives or dies. It was like this in Missouri two hundred years ago and it is still true [today](#),” said Tiana Herring, DPIC’s Data Storyteller and the lead author of the report.

“Compromised Justice” builds upon DPIC’s 2020 report, “Enduring Injustice: The Persistence of Racial Discrimination in the U.S. Death Penalty. It is the third in a series of reports detailing how individual state histories of racial injustice affect the current use of capital punishment. In 2022, DPIC released “Deeply Rooted: How Racial History Informs Oklahoma’s Death Penalty. In June 2023, DPIC released “Doomed to Repeat: The Legacy of Race in Tennessee’s Contemporary Death Penalty.”

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The **Death Penalty Information Center** (DPIC) is a national non-profit organization whose mission is to serve the media, policymakers, and the general public with data and analysis on issues concerning capital punishment and the people it affects. DPIC does not take a position on the death penalty itself but is critical of problems in its application.

Founded in 1990, DPIC promotes insightful discourse on the death penalty by curating and presenting expansive, authoritative data from credible sources and offering clear, trustworthy, and timely information and research about the history and current application of the death penalty. DPIC produces groundbreaking reports on issues such

as arbitrariness, costs, innocence, and racial disparities. DPIC also releases an annual year-end report highlighting significant developments and trends. A wide variety of free online resources are available on DPIC's award-winning website, including searchable databases; data visualizations; educational curricula; and podcast series, Discussions with DPIC, which explores diverse viewpoints and experiences related to capital punishment.