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**COMMENTARY**

**A Road Into Minds of Murderers**

**Instead of executing killers, study them and their motives in a research prison.**

By Lewis Yablonsky

When he cleared Illinois' death row last week, Gov. George Ryan forever changed our national conversation about the death penalty. I would like to take this conversation a step further.

I recommend building a federal maximum-security prison research center that could comfortably house 10,000 prisoners. The complex would be escape-proof; yet within its walls the inmates would be treated humanely.

Those convicted of first-degree murder across the country would no longer be subject to the death penalty, which would be abolished. Instead, after allowance of a reasonable period -- say five years -- for appeals, they would be relocated to this federal prison to spend life there with no possibility of parole. Or, a convicted murderer could waive appeals and go straight to the research federal prison. The convicts would have individual cells and do some kind of meaningful work, but their real jobs would be to become subjects of research.

Sociologists, psychologists, psychiatrists and physicians would study these killers to learn the causes of homicidal behavior and the scenarios that produced murder. This would provide an opportunity for murderers to atone by giving something back to society in the way of valid information. As we learned more about the social, psychological and physiological makeup of murderers, we would be in a better position to develop effective prevention programs.

David Westerfield, who has been sentenced to death for the murder of 7-year-old Danielle van Dam, and the man suspected of killing 49 women in the so-called Green River murders in Washington and Oregon are examples of potential research subjects who might benefit society. In the Green River serial killings, the man convicted of killing four of the women turned out to be the proverbial "nice guy who lived next door." In the lengthy Westerfield trial, the adversary nature of the criminal justice system blocked out any information on how or why he committed this heinous crime. Danielle's parents have said they want to know "how he killed our daughter and why he killed her."

Executing Westerfield would eliminate the possibility of getting these answers. But if he were to spend his life in a research prison, there would be a reasonable possibility that we would acquire some knowledge about the murder of children by pedophiles, and this might lead to preventing other murders.

Why isn't this done now? For the most part, inmates, even convicted murderers, are stopped by their attorneys or by the corrections hierarchy from cooperating with researchers. In a research prison, scientists might in time develop valuable data concerning the case histories, the physiology and the psychodynamics of people who commit murder.

Based on my experience as a criminologist who has interviewed thousands of violent offenders, worked as a therapist with hundreds in group therapy and participated in more than 100 criminal court cases as an expert witness over the last 50 years, I believe that

most of these individuals would cooperate with the goals of the institution. I have worked on six death penalty cases as an expert witness, and in most of those even the killers wanted to find out what drove them to do it.

Inmates of the research prison who chose not to cooperate could be penalized through the withholding of privileges. In time, most would perceive the advantages of participating. The goal of the program would be mainly research, not therapy or rehabilitation. Obviously, considerable legislation and many details would need to be worked out. But the benefits would be enormous. Such a facility would no doubt produce valuable insights into the subject of violence in general and therefore might equip society to prevent future violence. It would eliminate the horrendous death row situation, including its negative emotional effect on the general populations of prisons where death rows exist. It would free resources and staff at conventional prisons to carry out more forms of rehabilitation.

A federal research prison program would resolve some of the difficult legal and humanistic problems created by the death penalty, allow those convicted of capital murder to give something positive back to society in the form of knowledge for crime prevention and provide a more humane system for dealing with murderers in a more compassionate American society.

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