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Previous stories pertaining to Professor Jacobs' research:

["States With Higher Proportions Of Black Citizens More Likely To Have Death Penalty, Study Finds,"](#) 3/4/02.

["Prison Population Swells Under Republican Presidents Study Says,"](#) 8/20/01.

DEATH SENTENCES LINKED TO HISTORY OF LYNCHING IN STATES

COLUMBUS , Ohio – States that sentence the most criminals to death also tend to be the states that had the most lynchings in the past, a new study suggests.

Researchers found that the number of death sentences for all criminals – Black and white – were higher in states with a history of lynchings. But the link was even stronger when only Black death sentences were analyzed.

The results may be shocking to many people, but they aren't surprising to sociologists who study the racial aspects of the death penalty, said [David Jacobs](#), co-author of the study and professor of [sociology at Ohio State University](#) .



David Jacobs

“Our results suggest that the death penalty has become a sort of legal replacement for the lynchings in the past,” Jacobs said. “This hasn't been done overtly, and probably no one has consciously made such a decision. But the results show a clear connection.”

Another study finding reinforces this idea. Results showed that the number of death sentences in states with the most lynchings increased as the state's population of African Americans grew larger, at least to a certain point. The researchers believe that is because, as their numbers increase, Blacks are seen by the white majority as a growing threat.

Jacobs conducted the study with Jason Carmichael, a graduate student at Ohio State, and Stephanie Kent, assistant professor of sociology at the [University of Nevada, Las Vegas](#). Their results were published in the most recent issue of the [American Sociological Review](#).

For the study, the researchers examined the number of death sentences handed down in each of the mainland 48 states in 1971-72, 1981-82 and 1991-92. They computed lynching rates with data on state lynchings from 1889 to 1931 provided by the [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People](#).

In their analysis, the researchers used a widely accepted statistical technique that allowed them to take into account the fact that the death penalty is not legal in all states and, even where it is legal, it is not always used.

They also took into account a wide variety of factors that also affect the number of death sentences given in a state, such as the overall crime and murder rates, unemployment rates, and fundamentalist church memberships.

To confirm their findings, the researchers repeated their analyses using a separate, and perhaps more reliable, data set on the number of lynchings that occurred in 10 Southern states.

In both cases, the findings showed a clear link between the number of lynchings, the proportions of African Americans in the states, and the number of death sentences.

“We found that violent acts in the distant past still seemed to be linked to current legal decisions about who will live and who will die,” Jacobs said.

Why do the number of death sentences increase for white criminals as well as Blacks in states with a history of lynching?

“If there was clear discrimination against Blacks in death penalty sentencing, then the Supreme Court might again rule that the death penalty is unconstitutional,” Jacobs said. “So there may be an effort to not discriminate when imposing the death penalty. While the connection between lynchings and death sentences is strongest when only Black death sentences are considered, the connection between lynchings in the past and contemporary death sentences is present for both Blacks and whites.”

The findings also showed that the number of death sentences increases in states after a growth in the population of Blacks. But the number of death sentences begins to go down once the population of African Americans reaches a threshold of about 20 to 22 percent.

“Probably at that point, Blacks have enough votes and political influence within states to reduce the number of death sentences,” Jacobs said.

The results of the study suggest that the United States is still a product of its past, Jacobs said.

“Historical events continue to influence the current behavior of important social institutions. But the main point is that our findings do not support claims that the death penalty is administered in a color-blind fashion.”

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