

*Testimony in Support of HB-6425 and SB-1035*

Statement to the members of the Connecticut Joint Committee on Judiciary  
The Yale Chapter of Amnesty International  
Yale University

Amnesty International campaigns against the death penalty worldwide because the death penalty is a fundamental, irreversible denial of human rights. It is an affront to human dignity and perpetuates a cycle of violence that constitutes state affirmation of the expendability of human life. It is also an affront to American values. This country was founded on soaring aspirations, on the inherent truth that we are all created equal and endowed with inalienable rights. One of these is the right to life, and as a *right*, it cannot be abridged, it cannot be undermined, it cannot be revoked. Our founding documents exist to affirm our individual rights and to protect us from abuse by the state. The death penalty is in undeniable tension with these documents, with the right to life and the basic tenets of our system of government.

Two years ago the Connecticut state legislature voted to abolish the death penalty, but could not override then-Governor Rell's veto. In her veto message, Governor Rell described the death penalty as being reserved for those who "committed crimes that are revolting to our humanity and civilized society." What she failed to realize is that the death penalty—a system of state execution reserved for, yes, only the most heinous and despicable criminals—is also revolting to our humanity.

The belief that the death penalty ultimately and unequivocally violates human rights is not only a deeply held passion, as Governor Rell acknowledged. The death penalty is an attack on our foundational and universal human dignity—our common humanity. Governor Rell steadfastly rebuked those who "killed for the sake of killing," highlighting intent as the greater contributor to the egregiousness of such crimes. The effect, though—the elimination of a human life—is not to be diminished. The death penalty also has this cruel and inhuman result.

This is not to say that those who engage easily or frivolously in capital offenses, in acts that shock the conscience of humankind, should be given any reprieve. Our justice system has valid alternatives to the death penalty, such as life imprisonment without parole, that constitute adequate punishment even for the most repugnant crimes. Moreover, it is dangerous to engage in ethical equivalencies and hierarchically rank human beings; the point should not be to judge whose life is more worthwhile, but rather to affirm that all human life must be valued. A systemic process that ends a human existence cannot stand in a righteous and just society.

Supporters of the death penalty have argued that it serves as a valid deterrent for potential criminals, and that it is an application of firm but due justice. Yet our justice system is supposed to provide remedy to victims, not vengeance. Moreover, this view fails to give due credence to the reality that the death penalty system has not been and cannot be proven to be a successful deterrent, is more expensive than relevant alternatives because of the appellate process, is subject to human error, and is often riddled with economic and racial bias in its application, as Governor Rell briefly alluded to in her veto message. The risk of executing innocents is simply too high. The irrevocable nature of the death penalty renders it an unsustainable and indefensible remedy in an imperfect justice system.