

The Guardian view on the death penalty: Christa Pike's execution was botched, but cruelty is inherent

Three-quarters of nations have rightly abolished capital punishment in law or practice, but killing by the state has surged in the US

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What is the kindest way to kill? That's the question being asked once more following Tennessee's failed attempts to execute Christa Pike for the brutal murder of a classmate, Colleen Slemmer, when she was 18. The 50-year-old was taken to a medical facility, her condition unknown, with witnesses describing her snoring loudly around 40 minutes after receiving two injections of pentobarbital on Wednesday. It is the second botched killing in months, prompting Tennessee's governor to order a halt to executions.

Lethal injection was supposed to be the humane alternative to firing squads and electric chairs. They in turn were seen as an improvement on hanging, which looked much like lynching in a system disproportionately handing the death penalty to black men. The age and ill health of those executed, and the ethical refusal of most medical staff to be involved, may contribute to botched injections. But analysis of autopsy results has provided compelling evidence that suffering is inherent; injections – especially those involving paralytic drugs – have merely disguised it. What is described as safeguarding the dignity of prisoners is really about reducing the discomfort of witnesses who would otherwise see their suffering.

Pressure from campaigners on pharmaceutical companies has curbed the supply of lethal drugs, but it has not stopped executions. Donald Trump's enthusiasm for the death penalty has spurred on state officials, with the highest number of executions for 16 years in 2025. Some states have found alternative drugs, which may increase the suffering of those killed. Others are using different techniques. In June, the supreme court stopped Alabama from executing a prisoner with nitrogen gas, which it has used in other cases. The use of firing squads has resurged. Experts say such deaths can be "excruciating", especially where marksmen miss the heart of the condemned, with allegations that some executions could even have been deliberately botched.

The US is in a shameful minority. Three-quarters of countries have got rid of capital punishment in law or practice – with Lebanon this year becoming the first Middle Eastern country to abolish it.

Only 17 countries executed prisoners last year, though the total number killed rose to more than 2,700 – the highest since 1984. (The figures do not include China, believed to carry out the most executions.) But while Mr Trump and others champion capital punishment, the American public are turning away from it. In 1994, 80% supported it; by last year that had fallen to 52%. A majority of younger people oppose it.

High-profile miscarriages of justice have contributed to growing disquiet. So have cases such as Pike's. She endured sexual abuse and rape by three perpetrators in childhood, as well as beatings and neglect – yet her experiences and age were not adequately put forward by lawyers at her trial. Her bipolar disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder were diagnosed only afterwards. Sandra Babcock, an expert on the death penalty who has acted on Pike's behalf, argued that her execution would confirm that it was reserved "not for the worst of the worst, but for the most damaged and vulnerable among us".

The ultimate problem, however, is not that the wrong people are being executed, but that anyone is being executed. The search for a humane way to kill is inherently preposterous. It is not just lethal injection, the firing squad or electrocution that should be rejected – but the death penalty itself.