



ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE DEATH PENALTY IN ZIMBABWE



Introduction

The death penalty in Zimbabwe is retained in law and courts continue to impose death sentences. However, Zimbabwe has not executed anyone for 18 years, the last execution being in 2005. Zimbabwe is therefore classified by the United Nations as *de facto abolitionist*. Until the publication of our empirical research, there was limited knowledge available on the Zimbabwean attitudes to the death penalty, with concerns occasionally expressed that abolition may be opposed by the public.



According to the Zimbabwe Prisons and Correctional Services, there are approximately 64 people on the death row.

Between 2017 - 2019 The Death Penalty Project (UK) in partnership with Veritas (Zimbabwe) commissioned leading UK academics to undertake research to provide accurate and authoritative data on attitudes towards the death penalty. Two studies on attitudes were produced:

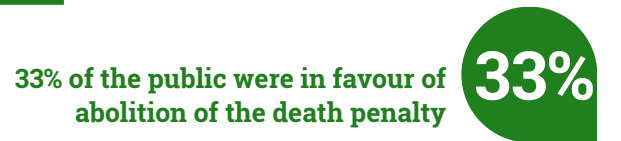
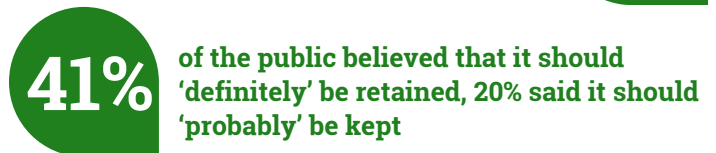
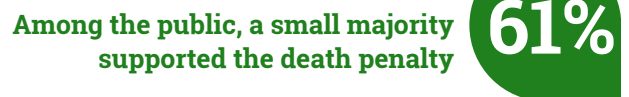
Public attitudes: 12 Years Without an Execution: Is Zimbabwe Ready for Abolition? (2018)- Authored by Dr Mai Sato, University of Reading. A survey of a representative sample of 1,200 members of the public.

Opinion leaders' attitudes: Time to abolish the death penalty in Zimbabwe: Exploring the views of its opinion leaders (2019) - Authored by Professor Carolyn Hoyle, Director of the Death Penalty Research Unit at University of Oxford. A study based on interviews with 42 opinion leaders - those considered influential in shaping, or in responding to, public opinion.

Here are the key findings of our empirical research:

Attitudes to capital punishment

Respondents in both studies were initially asked for their views on whether the death penalty should be retained or abolished in Zimbabwe.



Rationales for attitudes

The rationales offered by respondents to explain these initial views were similar across both studies.

For those who supported abolition, the primary reasons were: i) that capital punishment was an abuse of human rights/was inhumane; and ii) that it was contrary to their religious beliefs.

Many opinion leaders in support of abolition also gave examples of disadvantages faced by poorer people in the criminal justice system making them more likely to be sentenced to death.



Abuse of human rights/ inhuman

Contrary to religious beliefs

Poor face disadvantages in justice system

Those supporting retention did so primarily based on their belief in the deterrent effects of the death penalty: both in reducing serious crime, and in preventing individual offenders from reoffending.

Deter serious crime

Deter individuals from reoffending

Scrutinising opinions

More detailed questioning sought to examine respondents' knowledge of the death penalty and how entrenched their views were.

Level of knowledge

Public knowledge of the death penalty appears to be limited.



83% of public respondents were unaware that Zimbabwe had not carried out any executions in the past decade



Only 4% could correctly answer a set of seven basic questions about the death penalty in their country

The vast majority of opinion leaders, meanwhile, were found to be well informed about how the death penalty is applied in Zimbabwe.

Saliency

When presented with a range of typical death penalty cases, with details of common scenarios, the majority of the public were against the imposition of the death penalty.

The majority of the public were against the imposition of the death penalty in five out of six realistic scenarios



Support for the death penalty in each of these six scenarios ranged from 56% at the highest to just 23% at the lowest.

Given that initial public support had been 61%, these cases show that support for capital punishment is not in fact entrenched; people are likely to see many defendants as not deserving of the death penalty.

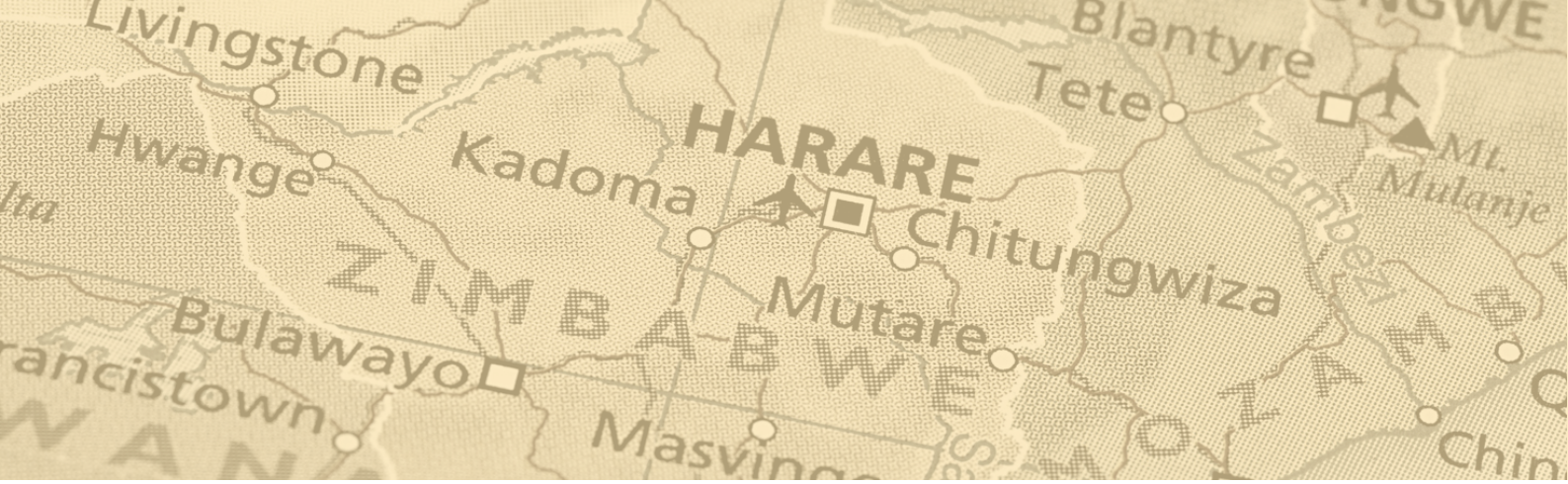
Trust in the criminal justice system

Interviews with opinion leaders demonstrated an overall lack of confidence in the fairness and safety of the Zimbabwean criminal justice system. Less than a quarter of opinion leaders trusted the courts to 'often' or 'very often' treat defendants fairly; more than half felt that the police could 'never', or only 'rarely', be trusted.



79% believed that wrongful convictions occur in Zimbabwe

60% thought that innocent people had either 'sometimes', 'often' or 'very often' been executed.



Deterrence and effective policy measures

Though deterrence was the main reason most supported retention, when asked about measures to address violent crime, respondents did not choose the death penalty.

When asked to rank a range of measures aimed at reducing crime 'better moral education of young people' was the first choice of 34%, while 'reduce poverty' was the first choice of 16%.

Better moral education of young people

Poverty reduction

Very few (only 8%) selected 'more executions' as their first choice.

The preference for moral standards and social policies was mirrored among opinion leaders.

When asked if murders would increase in Zimbabwe if the death penalty were to be replaced with life imprisonment, most opinion leaders believed that they would not.

64% of opinion leaders believed that retention had a harmful impact in terms of Zimbabwe's international reputation

The path to abolition in law

80% Of the 61% of the public who initially supported the death penalty, 80% stated they would accept a government policy of abolition

The findings make clear that the public could be easily persuaded by a government that demonstrated a firm and principled commitment to abolition. Opinion leaders also believed abolition would be a smooth process, most agreeing the public would accept it.

Among opinion formers, significant support for abolition was found to be based on a good understanding of the death penalty and its limitations in reducing violent crime.

The findings of our research have been welcomed by the President, indicating his support for abolition. He expressed his hope to see the death penalty eradicated in the country without delay in the foreword to our report '*Time to Abolish the Death Penalty in Zimbabwe: Exploring the Views of its Opinion Leaders.*'

President Emmerson Mnangagwa, May 2020:

"It is my sincere hope that [...] Zimbabwe will formally abolish the death penalty by removing it from our statute books."

Download the reports

Our studies of both opinion formers and the public are available to read in full on our websites.

www.deathpenaltyproject.org

www.veritaszim.ne

