

\*\*\*\*FOR RELEASE ON FRIDAY, APRIL 7, 2000\*\*\*\*  
 Wisconsin Public Radio/St. Norbert College Survey Center  
 The Wisconsin Survey  
 Spring 2000

**TOPIC: Death Penalty in Wisconsin**  
**RELEASE DATE: April 7, 2000**  
**SAMPLE: 574**  
**MARGIN OF ERROR: +/-4.1%**

### Opinion of Death Penalty

"Generally speaking, do you favor, moderately favor, moderately oppose or strongly oppose the use of the death penalty for persons convicted of capital crimes such as first degree intentional murder in Wisconsin?"

	Spring 1995	Spring 2000
Strongly Favor	50%	33%
Moderately Favor	21	32
Moderately Oppose	11	15
Strongly Oppose	14	17
Not Sure	4	3

"What is the primary reason you FAVOR the death penalty?"

	Spring 1995	Spring 2000
Crime Deterrent	24%	17%
It is Appropriate	31	56
Prison Issues	13	6
Tax Issues	16	11
Justice for Families	1	2
Other	13	7
Not Sure	0	<1

"What is the primary reason you OPPOSE the death penalty?"

	Spring 1995	Spring 2000
Moral Conviction	56%	61%

Possibility of Convicting Innocent	14	28
Costs/Economics	2	3
Other	23	7
Not Sure	5	2

"Now in regards to the murder of a child under the age of 16, do you strongly favor, moderately favor, moderately oppose or strongly oppose the use of the death penalty for persons convicted of such a crime?"

	Spring 1995	Spring 2000
Strongly Favor	61%	39%
Moderately Favor	14	25
Moderately Oppose	11	14
Strongly Oppose	10	18
Not Sure	4	4

### Preferred Method of Execution

"If Wisconsin were to enact a death penalty, which method of execution do you think the state should use. . .?"

	Spring 1995	Spring 2000
Electric Chair	7%	4%
Lethal Injection	73	82
Gas Chamber	4	2
Hanging	4	4
Other	4	3
Not Sure	9	5

### Life in Prison

"Do you strongly favor, moderately favor, moderately oppose or strongly oppose life in prison without parole for persons convicted of first degree intentional murder in Wisconsin?"

Strongly Favor	65%
----------------	-----

Moderately Favor	17
Moderately Oppose	8
Strongly Oppose	8
Not Sure	2

## SUMMARY

In 1995 the Wisconsin Public Radio/St. Norbert College Survey Center "Wisconsin Survey" examined the views of the state's citizens in regard to the death penalty. In the five years since that survey there has been substantial change in public attitudes about the use of the death penalty within Wisconsin, with support for this type of punishment dropping considerably from 1995. Nevertheless, nearly 2 in 3 Wisconsinites continue to favor the use of the death penalty as a punishment for capital crimes. These results are part of the findings of the Spring 2000 "Wisconsin Survey."

## OPINION OF THE DEATH PENALTY

When asked about their views on the use of the death penalty, a substantial majority of state residents indicate that they favor its use in the state of Wisconsin. Just under two-thirds of respondents stated that they are in favor of using the death penalty, with approximately half of these individuals strongly favoring this punishment, and the other half somewhat in favor of its use. Conversely, only 32% of Wisconsinites indicated opposition to using the death penalty in the state. While the findings do demonstrate widespread support for use of the death penalty in capital crime cases, there has also been a noticeable decrease in the level of support for the death penalty since 1995. Over the past five years there has been a significant decrease in the percent of residents who strongly favor the use of the death penalty, with 17% less respondents taking a strongly supportive position now than in 1995. This decrease corresponds with a less dramatic 6% drop in the overall percentage of individuals favoring the death penalty between 1995 and 2000.

This year's survey result also identified the characteristics of individuals supporting and opposing the death penalty. The findings give us evidence that Catholics are 8% more likely to oppose the death penalty than Protestants, Democrats are 21% more likely to be against the use of capital punishment than Republicans, and individuals with college degrees are 11% less likely to support capital punishment than individuals with only a high school education. Most notably, a tremendous age gap in terms of views on capital punishment has emerged among Wisconsin residents. While 76% of individuals under the age of 34 favor incorporating the death penalty in Wisconsin, only 47% of senior citizens maintained the same view. In fact the survey demonstrated as age progressed upwards from the age of 25, so did the likelihood of opposition to the death penalty. Similarly, support for the death penalty was strongest in Wisconsin's small towns (less than 2,500 in population), and weakest in its largest cities (over 200,000 in population). Finally, Wisconsin women were 8% more likely to oppose the death penalty than their male counterparts.

## REASONS FOR CITIZEN'S POSITIONS ON THE DEATH PENALTY

Of the 62% of the state's population favoring the death penalty, over half indicated that the primary reason for their position was that it was the proper response to first-degree murder, with many citing the biblical rule of "an eye for an eye." Crime deterrence was the second most noted reason for supporting

capital punishment, with 17% of those supporting the death penalty identifying this factor as the primary cause of their position. Of those not favoring the death penalty, over 6 in 10 cited moral conviction as their primary reason for opposing this type of punishment. In addition, approximately 3 in 10 individuals who oppose the death penalty indicated the possibility of convicting an innocent person as the primary cause of their opposition.

### **ADDITIONAL FINDINGS**

Other findings in the study include public views on the use of the death penalty in the murder of a child under 16, and the appropriate form of execution if Wisconsin were to adopt the death penalty. In terms of using the death penalty in the murder of a child under 16, 64% of respondents supported a sentence of capital punishment. These figures mark an 11% drop from 1995, and a 22% decrease in the percent of Wisconsinites strongly favoring the death penalty in these circumstances. In regards to methods of execution, lethal injection remains the overwhelming preference of state residents, with over 8 in 10 citizens selecting this option if the state was to adopt the death penalty.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

A majority of Wisconsinites continue to support the adoption of the death penalty in the state, but opposition to this type of punishment has increased in the past five years. Death penalty supporters continue to identify this act as the appropriate response for a capital crime, and as the primary reason for their position on the issue. Individuals opposing the death penalty most often cite moral conviction as the cause of their disfavor with capital punishment

*Christopher P. Borick, Director of Policy Research  
St. Norbert College Survey Center*