

Great Expectations: The Empty Promises of Capital Punishment to Protect Law Enforcement Officers

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This paper builds on themes developed in our first two papers regarding the efficacy of capital punishment, using the writings of Charles Dickens as a metaphor to develop a framework for understanding the conflict in the debate concerning capital punishment. We continue our study on what we have labeled the “Dickensian Dilemma” which focuses on the individual struggle between being against capital punishment but remaining “tough on crime” while public opinion remains firmly in support of capital punishment as a violent crime control. This paper examines police officer line of duty homicides in light of claims that capital punishment is a deterrent to violent crime and required to ensure maintenance of police officer safety. Our analysis of police officer line of duty homicides tells a much different story from the political rhetoric proffered to support capital punishment. We examine the arguments from both sides of the debate, and present data which separates fact from fiction. We conclude our paper with case studies of police officer line of duty homicides and the prosecutorial dispositions of those cases. In this section of the paper we focus on the failed notion of aggravating factors as providing objective criteria in death eligible cases, particularly when it comes to police officer homicides, and the uneven application of these criteria. The results of our study dispel capital punishment from the perceived notion of the officer protection which it proclaims to provide. As Dickens conveyed in his novel “Great Expectations”, we conclude that capital punishment, as a component of the criminal justice system, creates a superficial standard of morality, filled with empty promises.