

Ohio carries out first execution in 36 years

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On Friday, February 19 Wilford Berry Jr., a mentally retarded man, became the first person to be put to death in the State of Ohio in 36 years.

Berry was convicted of the December 1, 1989 murder of his employer, Charles Mitroff Jr., a Cleveland baker. Despite his mental condition he was ruled competent to stand trial.

Attorneys for Berry exhausted all legal appeals by 2 p.m. Friday when the US Supreme Court unanimously denied an emergency appeal to hear his case and issue a stay of execution. On Thursday, Berry's lawyers failed to influence either the Ohio Supreme Court or the Cincinnati-based US Sixth Circuit Court of Appeal to prevent Berry's death.

Lawyers representing Berry's mother and half-sister appealed to the Ohio courts for a court-supervised review of his mental competency, citing his mental retardation. They also called attention to further mental impairment caused by a severe beating he received from other death row inmates in 1997.

According to the human rights group Amnesty International, the US has carried out over 500 executions since the death penalty was reestablished in 1976. During the first six years following its reinstatement 11 prisoners were executed. By contrast, 300 people have been executed in the past six years. In violation of international law, at least 30 mentally retarded individuals have been put to death in the United States, while many more mentally ill people have been executed.

There are presently 190 inmates on death row in Ohio, with 46 from the Cincinnati area alone. More than 3,300 people currently sit on death row in the US, the highest known death row population of any country, according to Amnesty International.





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