

Paranoid schizophrenic executed in Texas

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Larry Keith Robison, 42, was put to death on Friday, January 21, despite pleas to Texas Governor George W. Bush to spare the life of the mentally ill man. He died by lethal injection in Huntsville Friday evening. The European Union, Pope John Paul II and the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill had called on Bush to halt the execution.

Larry Robison, a diagnosed paranoid schizophrenic, was convicted and sentenced to death for the murders of five people in 1982, carried out while he was in a psychotic state. Robison's mother, Lois, had repeatedly sought treatment for her son, but was unable to find affordable psychiatric help in Texas. Because her son was unemployed and over 21 he was not covered by his parents' medical insurance and they couldn't pay the enormous cost of private mental health care.

Robison was the fourth person put to death in Texas this month. Executed earlier this month were David Hicks, Earl Heiselbetz and Spencer Goodman. The state plans to execute Billy Hughes, Glen McGinnis and James Moreland this week.

Since the US Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty in 1976, 202 men and one woman have been put to death in Texas, more than any other state. Virginia, the second-highest state, has put to death 75 people.

Texas Governor and Republican presidential frontrunner George W. Bush, campaigning in Iowa, took no action to stop the execution. Bush spokesman Mike Jones commented that it is not the place of the governor to make judgments about the mental competency of inmates. "Those are issues to be dealt with by the courts," Jones said.

As governor, Bush has presided over 114 executions since taking office in 1995, and has commuted only one death sentence. Included among those executed have been the mentally ill as well as those convicted of crimes when they were juveniles. There are currently

460 men and 9 women on death row in Texas. According to Judge Michael McCormick of the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals, "The reason we have so many people on death row is plain and simple: We have a lot of bad people committing capital murders, and we are doing something about it."

The Texas Court of Criminal Appeals issued a stay of execution in Robison's case last August 17, ordering a lower court to hold a hearing to determine whether Robison was mentally competent to be executed under Texas law. State law says that a prisoner must be coherent enough to understand why he is being put to death, but does not prohibit execution of those who are mentally ill at the time of the crime. The lower court ruled that Robison understood the nature of his punishment and therefore could be put to death.

At Robison's two criminal trials juries never heard evidence of his mental illness. The assistant district attorney who prosecuted his case commented, "There are an awful lot of people diagnosed as schizophrenic that aren't killing people."

This latest execution underscores the brutalization and criminalization of the mentally ill by the US criminal justice and prison system, and the state of Texas in particular. There are currently a quarter-million mentally ill individuals incarcerated in the nation's prisons and jails. While Texas has institutionalized the execution of the mentally ill, the state ranks forty-second among the 50 states in per capita spending on mental health services.

On Tuesday, January 25, Texas plans to execute Glen McGinnis. McGinnis was convicted of the 1990 murder of Leta Ann Wilkerson, carried out when he was 17 years old. McGinnis, who is black, was convicted by an all-white jury. Amnesty International, the Pope and the European Union have called on Governor Bush to stop the execution.

Defense lawyers argued at trial that McGinnis's

abusive and destitute childhood be taken into account in the case. McGinnis left home at age 11, having been neglected by his crack-addicted, prostitute mother and beaten by his stepfather, who reportedly beat him with a baseball bat.

Prosecutor Peter Speers instructed the jury in the case to ignore pleas for mercy on McGinnis's behalf. "The kind of therapy that ought to be prescribed for him is the kind of chemotherapy available up at [Huntsville prison] called a lethal injection," Speers argued.

The United States leads the world in the execution of prisoners for crimes committed before the age of 18. Only the United States and Somalia have failed to ratify the 10-year-old UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which prohibits the death penalty for offenses committed by minors. The only other countries permitting the execution of juveniles are Iran, Nigeria, Pakistan and Saudi-Arabia.



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