

Texas milestone: 500th execution

Woman set to be given lethal injection today

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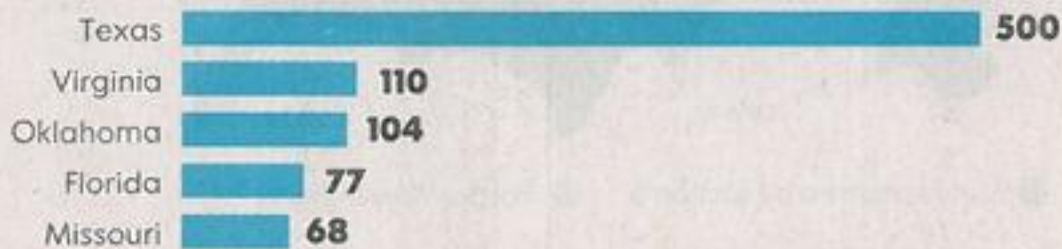
HUNTSVILLE, TEXAS Texas, the nation's most prolific executioner of criminals, is about to put its 500th inmate to death since the mid-1970s.

Barring a last-minute reprieve, Kimberly McCarthy, 52, a former wife of a Black Panther, will be given a lethal injection of pentobarbital at around 6:10 p.m. today for the murder of a 70-year-old Dallas County woman during a 1997 robbery.

And although McCarthy's crime was a notorious one — she used a butcher knife and candelabra to beat and fatally stab a retired college professor — her death is likely to bring even more attention than her crime. The grim milestone of 500 executions here has reignited debate on both sides of the death penalty issue.

Texas is by far the most fatal of the nation's 34 death penalty states. Virginia places a distant second with 110 executions since the death penalty was federally reinstated in 1976, fol-

NUMBER OF EXECUTIONS SINCE 1976



Source: Death Penalty Information Center

JULIE SNIDER, USA TODAY

lowed by Oklahoma with 104 and Florida with 77, according to the Death Penalty Information Center, a Washington-based group that advocates against the death penalty.

Executions do little to deter criminals, said Kristin Houle, executive director of the Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty. There have been 12 death row exonerations in Texas since 1976, she said.

At least five executed offenders were "strongly suspected" of being innocent, Houle said.

"The system is rife with doubt and failures," she said. "This is a punishment that can't be reversed."

Dudley Sharp, a Houston-based death penalty and victims advocate,

said the death penalty absolutely deters some segment of the criminal population. "Executed murders don't harm or murder again," he said.

Most Texans agree. A University of Texas/Texas Tribune poll conducted last year showed that nearly two-thirds of respondents remain overwhelmingly in support of the death penalty.

Texas has been executing murderers since the 1920s, most famously with an electric chair nicknamed "Old Sparky" by inmates.

In all, 361 men died in the electric chair until the Supreme Court declared the death penalty "cruel and unusual punishment" in 1972. It was reinstated four years later.

DOES ANYONE EVER

Think of the ones who
were executed, only later

to be exonerated? Dead is

Dead. You can't fix that but you

can fix a broken system.