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What Would Be Gained if Terry Williams is Executed?

The Color of Law

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There's an execution planned in Pennsylvania, the first one in thirteen years. Gov. Tom Corbett signed a death warrant for Terrance "Terry" Williams. Barring intervention from the Governor, the Pennsylvania Board of Pardons, or the Philadelphia District Attorney, Williams will be executed on October 3.

But the execution should not go forward.

Two things stand out about the case of Terry Williams. First, he suffered a traumatic childhood of sexual and physical abuse, and ultimately killed two of his abusers. Second, a broad coalition of organizations, religious leaders, advocates and others - including the widow of one of his victims and several of the jurors who convicted him - are calling for [clemency](#) for Terry.

First raped at the age of six by an older boy in the neighborhood, and coming home crying and with a bloodied backside, Terry Williams just couldn't win from day one. His childhood was one of poverty, neglect and violence. Terry was brutally abused by his mother with fists, switches, belts and extension cords, and beaten by his alcoholic stepfather, who would smash through the boy's door to administer the beatings.

Throughout his youth, Williams was passed around by sexual predators, exploited as a sexual object by middle aged adult men who gained access to their teen prey with money, food and clothes. A middle school teacher betrayed his trust and repeatedly raped him.

While in juvenile detention for a burglary, Terry was gang raped by two older boys.

And there was no one to protect Terry. No one stepped in to help this traumatized boy deal with the anger, shame, confusion, paranoia and self-hatred he experienced from years of manipulation and abuse. As a result of receiving no counseling or mental health treatment, Terry resorted to self-mutilation by banging his head against the wall, cutting himself and making himself bleed. Further, he attempted suicide in an effort to make the pain go away, and self-medicated in the form of alcohol and drug abuse.

But in the end, Williams lashed out at two sources of his pain, personified: Herbert Hamilton and Amos Norwood. Using their status to lure teenage boys, these two middle aged men - a sports booster and a church leader, respectively - sexually abused Terry. At 17, Terry killed Hamilton. And six months later, barely 18, he killed Norwood the day after Norwood raped him, for which Williams was given a death sentence.

However, the jurors were unaware of the history of sexual abuse. "I was not aware that the victim in that case had been having sex with Terrance other teenage boys," said [one of five jurors](#) now supporting life for Williams. "I also was not aware that Terrance had been abused by other men. That would have been a factor in my decision."

In addition, the jurors were not instructed that a life sentence in Pennsylvania means life without parole. Pennsylvania is the only state that does not require such an instruction in first- and second-degree murder cases. A number of jurors say they would have voted for life rather than death. "The reason that I opted for the death sentence was because I was under the impression that if we sentenced Terrance Williams to life in prison then he could get out on parole," said another juror. "If I had known that a life sentence meant life without parole, I personally would have voted for a life sentence, and I think other people probably would have voted for life too."

[Mamie Norwood](#), the widow of the victim in Terry's capital case, wants clemency as well. She said that she forgave him several years ago after a process of prayer and self-reflection. "I do not wish to see Terry Williams executed. His execution would go against my Christian faith and my belief system. He is worthy of forgiveness and I am at peace with my decision to forgive him and have been for many years. I wish to see his life spared," she said.

Norwood and these jurors are not alone in seeking clemency for Terry Williams. Now, 35 child advocates, 36 former judges and prosecutors, 48 law professors, 49 mental health professionals and dozens of religious leaders, including the Archbishop of Philadelphia, have publicly called for a commutation of his death sentence. They join the European Union and numerous organizations such as Amnesty International, Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights, Support Center for Child Advocates, and the Pennsylvania Prison Society. Moreover, thousands of people have signed a viral [online petition](#) at Change.org demanding clemency.

"With our years of experience in reviewing claims of rape and other sexual violence, we speak out clearly that a crime was committed against Terry, nothing less," wrote the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape. "Under no construction of American law or societal norms, is the sexual exploitation of a 13-year-old boy by a 50-year-old man a relationship, homosexual or otherwise. It is rape and any suggestion to the contrary is offensive."

Meanwhile, a bipartisan state Senate commission wrote a letter to Gov. Corbett calling for a postponement of all executions.

Remorseful and a different person, Terry Williams' life is on the line - literally. What could possibly be gained by his execution? A star athlete and a freshman at Cheyney University when he was convicted, Terry suffered from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and it got the best of him. We will never know what he could have been, but we do know that he was an exploited victim of violence, leaving a devastating impact on his emotional and psychological development. Executing him will only continue a vicious cycle of violence.

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