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Studied to death

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New Jersey does not need another commission to study the death penalty. Period. End of story. The state, perhaps more than any other, has been a greenhouse of research on the death penalty. Nonprofits, the Legislature and the state Supreme Court have all ordered up studies. Defense lawyers have created a cottage industry devoted to the issue. Throw in virtually every state Supreme Court ruling in a death penalty case and you've got more treatises. There is no dearth of information when it comes to understanding New Jersey's death penalty law and how it has been applied since it was reinstated in 1982.

Another study is quite simply a waste. That's why the New Jersey Death Penalty Study Commission, which began meeting to hear testimony last week, serves neither proponents nor opponents of the death penalty. Lawmakers have one simple challenge: to decide whether they have the political will to repeal the death penalty.

No execution has been carried out in New Jersey since 1963. There have been 197 capital murder trials in New Jersey. Juries returned 60 death sentences, but only nine people remain on death row. All but two had their sentences reversed. The other two died in prison. A recent study maintains that prosecuting and defending these capital cases has cost the state \$253 million more than what it would have spent if there were no death penalty.

More fodder for repealing the death penalty came this week in a report detailing the stories of 25 New Jersey inmates convicted of serious crimes who were later exonerated, including Larry Peterson, who once faced the death penalty and spent 18 years in prison before DNA evidence revealed he could not have been the killer.

All of this points to one conclusion: No more studies, please. What is needed now is legislation repealing the death penalty and replacing it with life in prison without possibility of parole.

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