INTERVIEW PROJECT

TAIWAN

THE EXPERIENCE OF PRISONERS SERVING DEATH AND LIFE SENTENCES

2025

Executive Summary

"No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel,
inhuman or degrading treatment or
punishment."
Article 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Background

Taiwan continues to retain the death penalty. Having incorporated the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights into domestic law in 2009, the government should have moved toward abolition. Instead, Taiwan's actions have been quite limited. Public discussion tends to focus on whether to keep or abolish the death penalty, while the issue of keeping prisoners on death row receives little attention.

The Taiwan Alliance to End the Death Penalty (TAEDP) has studied capital punishment and worked directly with death row prisoners since 2003. Over two decades of advocacy for abolition and supporting individuals facing the death penalty, TAEDP has observed that as time in custody increases, these prisoners live under constant uncertainty about when they might face execution. This stress is compounded by pressure from public opinion to implement the death penalty and the government's lack of commitment to abolition. Psychologically, prisoners vacillate between maintaining a will to live and wishing to die. This fluctuating mental state can develop into what is internationally known as the "death row phenomenon."

In order to understand the living conditions, mental and physical health, and personal experiences of those on death row in Taiwan, and to gain deeper insight into Taiwan's death row phenomenon, TAEDP began planning this project around 2020. The research team brought together professionals in law, psychiatry, psychology, and social work. Fieldwork officially began in late 2021, and the report was completed in September 2025. The study focused primarily on individuals sentenced to death for murder and related offenses, awaiting execution, as well as those serving life imprisonment. The aim is to understand their prison conditions, correctional treatment, and life experience.

Data Sources and Sample Profile

The study employed two primary research methods: questionnaire surveys and in-depth interviews. These explored prison conditions, daily life in custody, and personal life stories. And life-sentenced prisoners were included as a comparison group. Additionally, focus group interviews were held with scholars and experts to review the collected data and discuss key issues.

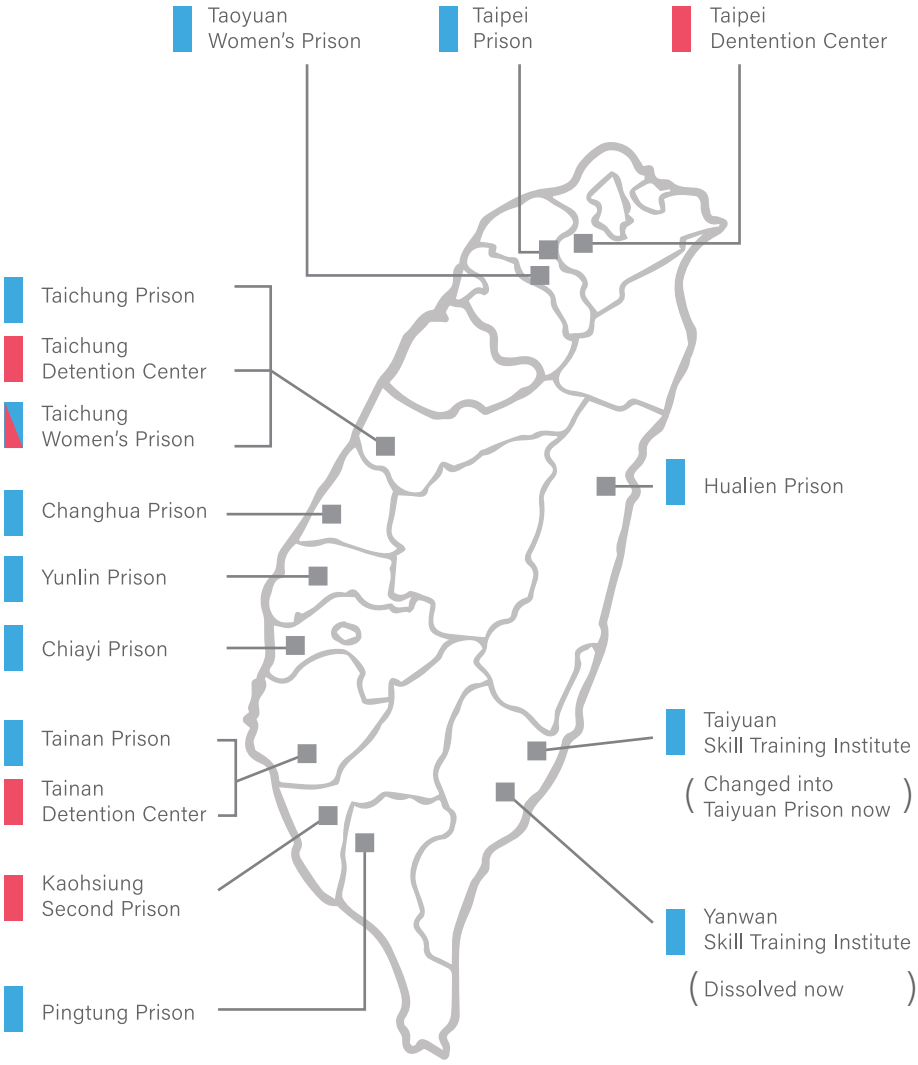
During the interview period, all 38 death row prisoners were invited to participate. One declined due to illness. From a sample of 47 life-sentenced prisoners, seven either declined or were already paroled. In the end, interviews were conducted with 37 death row prisoners and 40 life-sentenced prisoners. In total, 77 prisoners from around Taiwan participated.

Map of the Correctional Facilities the Interviewees Detained

The chart shows only the correctional institutions where interviewees were held, not all nationwide.

(**Administrative division**)

Death row **Life-sentenced**

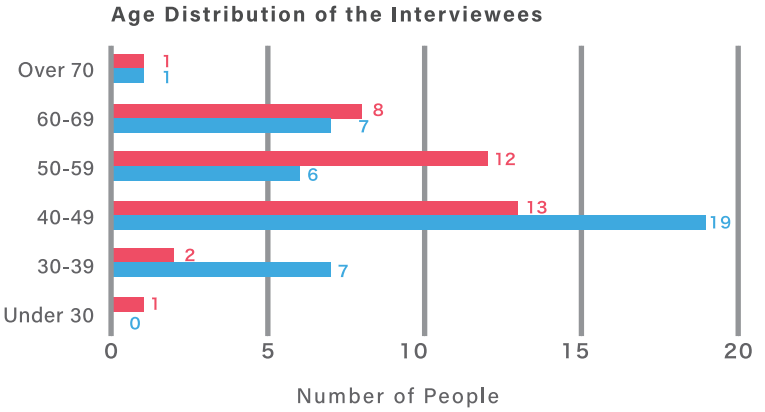


Key Demographic Indicators

Death row Life-sentenced

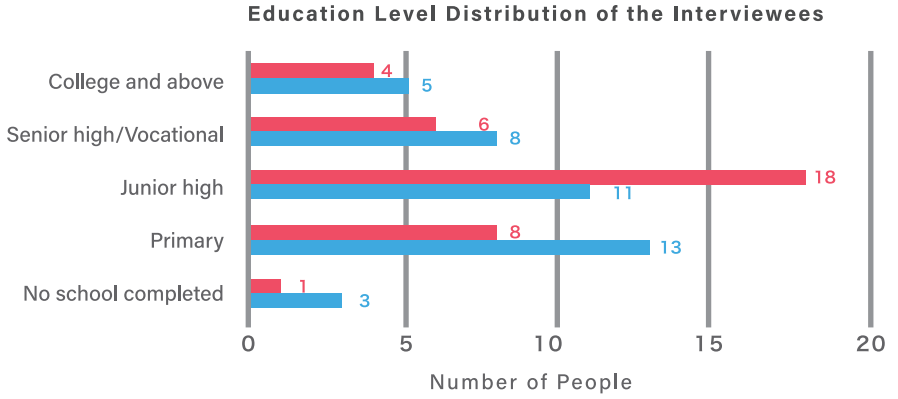
Age

At the time of the interviews, death row prisoners ranged from 29 to 70 years old (average for men: 51; the sole female: 41). Life-sentenced prisoners ranged from 31 to 74 years old (average for men: 49; for women: 52).



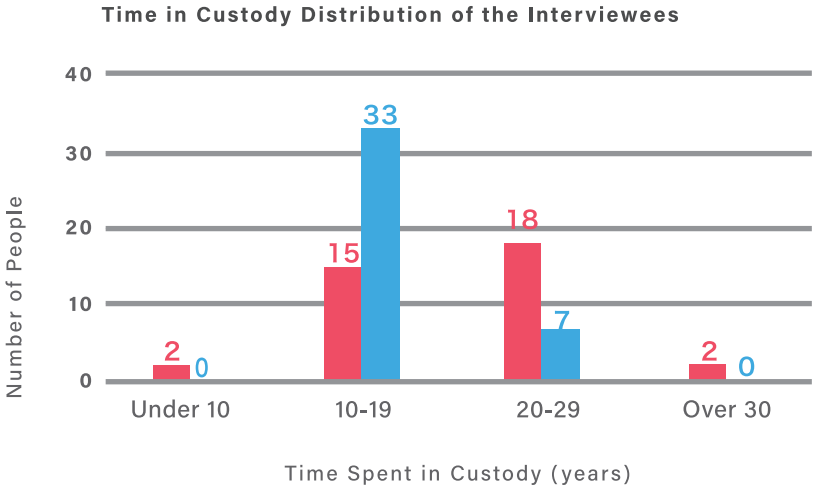
Education

In both groups, roughly 70% had completed only junior high school or less, indicating generally low educational attainment. Some had not completed compulsory education.



Length of Incarceration

Counting from pre-trial detention, death row prisoners had been in custody for an average of 20 years (range: 9–35 years). Life-sentenced prisoners averaged 16 years (range: 10–23 years).



Main Research Findings

The diverse backgrounds of serious offenders

Both death row and life-sentenced prisoners shared many similarities. Over half of them had never been in prison before their current offense.A significant number had experienced school bullying, abuse from teachers or parents, or domestic violence. Some of them had been forced to leave school early to work for survival. The study found that long-term imprisonment can lead to personal change, and many expressed thoughtful views on making amends and offering compensation to victims' families. From these aspects, we see a more complete and humanized picture of those convicted of serious crimes.

The death row phenomenon in Taiwan

Death row prisoners in this study had spent an average of 13 years on death row. The longest serving prisoner actually exceeded 22 years imprisonment. All of them live under constant anxiety about execution, with no clear timeline. Several had lived through a period before 2006, when prisoners were required to wear leg shackles 24 hours a day. Some also lived in an even earlier era when executions were carried out swiftly. These prisoners endured a deliberately-constructed, pervasive atmosphere of fear. This sustained pressure often led to alternating desires to live and die. In some cases, prisoners took concrete actions to speed up their own deaths, such as by abandoning legal appeals, formally requesting the Minister of Justice to expedite execution, or attempting suicide.

This study concludes that many death row prisoners' circumstances match international descriptions of the death row phenomenon, amounting to additional punishment and suffering, and raising concerns over inhuman or degrading treatment, and even the possibility of torture.

The mental and physical toll of long-term imprisonment

From pre-trial detention to the time of interview, participants had spent an average of more than 16 years in custody. Prison life was described as monotonous, unsettled, and lacking meaningful educational or rehabilitative opportunities, leading to feelings of emptiness and helplessness. The latest revised requirement for life-sentenced prisoners to serve at least 25 years imprisonment before parole eligibility also seems to be fostering hopelessness. This further undermines prospects for reintegration into society. The study warns against raising this threshold further or introducing life without parole.

Key Policy Recommendations

- Create clear and consistent treatment principles for prisoners, including individualized treatment plans, should be established. Allow death row prisoners to work in the workshop like other prisoners.

- Evaluate the effectiveness of “the pilot program for individualized treatment plans for death row prisoners” and make necessary adjustments.

- Review the cases of death row prisoners who have been in custody for more than 25 years to prevent cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment.

- Refrain from raising the parole eligibility period beyond the current 25 years for life sentences, and refrain from introducing a sentence of life without parole.

Conclusion

This study reveals the realities of Taiwan's correctional system and the lived experiences of prisoners convicted of serious offences. It sheds light on the local death row phenomenon. TAEDP hopes that these findings will enable a more complete and factual foundation for public debate on capital punishment. The study also calls for relevant authorities to adopt its recommendations to strengthen human rights protections in prisons, implement a constructive correctional education program, and promote effective rehabilitation programs—thereby enhancing the social safety net. Even prisoners sentenced to death remain citizens under the law. Their dignity and legal rights must be respected and protected.

FULL REPORT In Chinese

https://www.taedp.org.tw/topic/11471

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