

PUBLIC

AI Index: AMR 51/101/2003

EXTRA 36/03

Death penalty

11 July 2003

USA (Ohio)

Richard Wade Cooley (m), white, aged 36

Richard Cooley is scheduled to be executed in Ohio on 24 July 2003. He was sentenced to death in December 1986 for the murders of Dawn McCreery and Wendy Offredo, aged 20 and 21 respectively, committed in August of that year in Akron, Ohio.

According to the trial record, on 31 August 1986, 17-year-old Clint Dickens dropped a chunk of concrete off a bridge, hitting a car beneath. He and his two friends, 19-year-old Richard Cooley and 18-year-old Kenneth Horonetz, then offered a ride to the occupants of the car, Wendy Offredo and Dawn McCreery, so that they could call for help. They drove them to a nearby mall where Wendy Offredo called her mother, and Richard Cooley gave the mother directions to pick up the women. Dawn McCreery called the police. The five then got back in Cooley's car to drive back to the damaged vehicle. Richard Cooley and Clint Dickens had decided to rob the women, and Kenneth Horonetz jumped out of the car when the robbery began. The women were driven to an isolated wooded area, where they were subsequently murdered by blows to the head.

After a two-day trial in November 1986 in front of a panel of three judges, Richard Cooley was convicted of kidnapping, rape, robbery and murder. After a sentencing phase which began and ended on 5 December 1986, he was condemned him to death. Clint Dickens received a life sentence, being too young for the death penalty under Ohio law. He will not be eligible for parole until 2082.

Richard Cooley's clemency petition seeks commutation of the death sentence on the grounds of his efforts towards rehabilitation during his more than 16 years on death row. It details how, in the structured environment of prison, he has matured into a 36-year-old adult who is remorseful for the crime and has accepted responsibility for his role in the deaths of Wendy Offredo and Dawn McCreery.

At the time of the crime, Richard Cooley was a teenager emerging from a childhood of parental abuse and neglect. According to the clemency petition, when Richard was a young child, his father adopted a toilet training regime that included shoving the child's head into the toilet or rubbing the child's face in his own faeces. The father, who abused drugs and alcohol, allegedly used to hit the boy in the face without provocation or warning, and would beat him with a belt and his hands, sometimes to the point of drawing blood. Richard Cooley's mother also developed a drinking problem. The boy began drinking alcohol from the age of five. By the age of 12, he was using marijuana, speed, and/or opiates on a daily basis. At the time of the crime in August 1986, two months past the age of 19, Richard Cooley was on a month's leave from the army, and had engaged in a three week drinking and drug binge. On the day of the murders, he had consumed marijuana, beer, cocaine and opium with his two friends.

At a clemency hearing on 8 July 2003 before the Ohio Parole Board, prosecutors and relatives of the murdered women urged the Board to allow the execution to go forward. Family and friends of Richard Cooley appealed for him to be allowed to live. The Board's recommendation is not binding on the Governor.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Amnesty International opposes the death penalty in all cases, unconditionally. Every death sentence is an affront to human dignity, every execution a symptom of, not a solution to, a culture of violence. The death penalty has not been shown to have a special deterrent effect and extends the suffering of one family, that of

the murder victim, to another, that of the condemned prisoner. It denies the possibility of rehabilitation and reconciliation.

Today, 112 countries are abolitionist in law or practice. The USA, a country whose government frequently claims it is the global human rights champion, has carried out 864 executions since resuming judicial killing in 1977. The vast majority of these killings have taken place in the past decade, and include 44 so far this year.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in English or your own language, in your own words:

- expressing sympathy for the families and friends of Dawn McCreery and Wendy Offredo, explaining that you are not seeking to condone the manner of their deaths or minimize the suffering caused;
- opposing the execution of Richard Cooley;
- noting that at the time of the crime, Richard Cooley was a teenager emerging from a violent and abusive family environment, and that he had a long history of alcohol and drug abuse;
- suggesting that the state should seek to constructive solutions to the cycle of violence and abuse, not perpetuate it by killing another person;
- noting that the power of executive clemency, unlike the courts, can take into account efforts of the prisoner towards rehabilitation and reform;
- calling on the Governor to act with compassion and to spare the life of Richard Cooley.

APPEALS TO:

Governor Bob Taft,
30th Floor, 77 South High Street,
Columbus, Ohio 43215-6117, USA

Telegram: Governor Bob Taft, Columbus, Ohio, USA

Fax: +1 614 466 9354

Email: Governor.Taft@das.state.oh.us

Salutation: Dear Governor

COPIES TO: Diplomatic representatives of USA accredited to your country.

You may email letters of concern (not more than 250 words) to the editor of the Akron Beacon Journal at: vop@thebeaconjournal.com

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY.