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By Kevin Johnson, USA TODAY

The California death penalty system, plagued by backlogs in appeals that routinely delay executions by more than two decades, is "dysfunctional" and in danger of collapse, a state commission concluded Monday.

The report by the California Commission on the Fair Administration of Justice offered a blistering indictment of the system, saying the state has fostered a "disrespect for the rule of law and weakened any possible deterrent benefits of capital punishment."

In the state that maintains the largest death row — currently 669 condemned inmates — the report determined that California could save up to \$100 million a year by abolishing the death penalty. Yet the 22-member panel stopped short of recommending its elimination.

"Although outright abolition would be the cleanest, most definitive approach to death penalty reform ... we recognize that, ultimately, a political judgment must be made about whether the time is right to seek a fresh electoral choice on whether California ought to have a death penalty," the report said.

The commission — created by the state Senate in 2004 to recommend changes to the criminal justice system — suggested that the state consider reducing the number of death-eligible cases so that the death penalty can be carried out faster. The current backlog is 180 appeals, as only 30 to 40 cases can be decided each year, the report said.

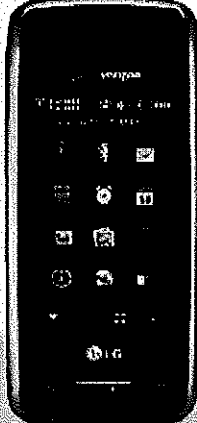
"The lapse of time of over two decades between sentence and the imposition of sentence is unacceptable," Los Angeles Police Chief William Bratton, a panel member, wrote in a statement. "To require the family of the victims to wait over 20 years ... only adds to their pain and suffering and renders it an illusory punishment."

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