

SUBCHAPTER XV. CAPITAL PUNISHMENT.

Article 100.

Capital Punishment.

§ 15A-2000. Sentence of death or life imprisonment for capital felonies; further proceedings to determine sentence.

(a) Separate Proceedings on Issue of Penalty. –

- (1) Except as provided in G.S. 15A-2004, upon conviction or adjudication of guilt of a defendant of a capital felony in which the State has given notice of its intent to seek the death penalty, the court shall conduct a separate sentencing proceeding to determine whether the defendant should be sentenced to death or life imprisonment. A capital felony is one that may be punishable by death.
- (2) The proceeding shall be conducted by the trial judge before the trial jury as soon as practicable after the guilty verdict is returned. If prior to the time that the trial jury begins its deliberations on the issue of penalty, any juror dies, becomes incapacitated or disqualified, or is discharged for any reason, an alternate juror shall become a part of the jury and serve in all respects as those selected on the regular trial panel. An alternate juror shall become a part of the jury in the order in which the alternate juror was selected. If the trial jury is unable to reconvene for a hearing on the issue of penalty after having determined the guilt of the accused, the trial judge shall impanel a new jury to determine the issue of the punishment. If the defendant pleads guilty, the sentencing proceeding shall be conducted before a jury impaneled for that purpose. A jury selected for the purpose of determining punishment in a capital case shall be selected in the same manner as juries are selected for the trial of capital cases.
- (3) In the proceeding there is no requirement to resubmit evidence presented during the guilt determination phase of the case, unless a new jury is impaneled, but all this evidence is competent for the jury's consideration in passing on punishment. Evidence may be presented as to any matter that the court deems relevant to sentence and may include matters relating to any of the aggravating or mitigating circumstances enumerated in subsections (e) and (f) of this section. Any evidence that the court deems to have probative value may be received.
- (4) The State and the defendant or the defendant's counsel shall be permitted to present argument for or against sentence of death. The defendant or defendant's counsel has the right to the last argument.

(b) Sentence Recommendation by the Jury. – Instructions determined by the trial judge to be warranted by the evidence shall be given by the court in its charge to the jury prior to its deliberation in determining sentence. The court shall give appropriate instructions in those cases in which evidence of the defendant's intellectual disability requires the consideration by the jury of the provisions of G.S. 15A-2005. In all cases in which the death penalty may be authorized, the judge shall include in the judge's instructions to the jury that it must consider any aggravating circumstance or circumstances or mitigating circumstance or circumstances from the lists provided in subsections (e) and (f) of this section that are supported by the evidence and shall furnish to the jury a written list of issues relating to the aggravating or mitigating circumstance or circumstances.

After hearing the evidence, argument of counsel, and instructions of the court, the jury shall deliberate and render a sentence recommendation to the court, based upon all of the following matters:

- (1) Whether any sufficient aggravating circumstance or circumstances as enumerated in subsection (e) of this section exists.
- (2) Whether any sufficient mitigating circumstance or circumstances as enumerated in subsection (f) of this section, that outweigh the aggravating circumstance or circumstances found, exists.
- (3) Based on these considerations, whether the defendant should be sentenced to death or to imprisonment in the State's prison for life.

The sentence recommendation must be agreed upon by a unanimous vote of the 12 jurors. Upon delivery of the sentence recommendation by the foreman of the jury, the jury shall be individually polled to establish whether each juror concurs and agrees to the sentence recommendation returned.

If the jury cannot, within a reasonable time, unanimously agree to its sentence recommendation, the judge shall impose a sentence of life imprisonment. The judge shall in no instance impose the death penalty when the jury cannot agree unanimously to its sentence recommendation.

(c) Findings in Support of Sentence of Death. – When the jury recommends a sentence of death, the foreman of the jury shall sign a writing on behalf of the jury that shows all of the following:

- (1) The statutory aggravating circumstance or circumstances that the jury finds beyond a reasonable doubt.
- (2) That the statutory aggravating circumstance or circumstances found by the jury are sufficiently substantial to call for the imposition of the death penalty.
- (3) That the mitigating circumstance or circumstances are insufficient to outweigh the aggravating circumstance or circumstances found.

(d) Review of Judgment and Sentence. –

- (1) The judgment of conviction and sentence of death is subject to automatic review by the Supreme Court of North Carolina pursuant to procedures established by the Rules of Appellate Procedure. In its review, the Supreme Court shall consider the punishment imposed as well as any arguments raised on appeal. The review shall occur within 24 months of entry of judgment unless the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court makes a written finding of extraordinary circumstances that provide good cause for a delay.
- (2) The sentence of death shall be overturned and a sentence of life imprisonment imposed in lieu thereof by the Supreme Court upon a finding that the record does not support the jury's findings of any aggravating circumstance or circumstances upon which the sentencing court based its sentence of death, or upon a finding that the sentence of death was imposed under the influence of passion, prejudice, or any other arbitrary factor, or upon a finding that the sentence of death is excessive or disproportionate to the penalty imposed in similar cases, considering both the crime and the defendant. The Supreme Court may suspend consideration of death penalty cases until it is prepared to make the comparisons required under this section.
- (3) If the sentence of death and the judgment of the trial court are reversed on appeal for error in the post-verdict sentencing proceeding, the Supreme Court shall order that a new sentencing hearing be conducted in conformity with the procedures of this Article.

(e) Aggravating Circumstances. – Aggravating circumstances that may be considered are limited to the following:

- (1) The capital felony was committed by a person lawfully incarcerated.

- (2) The defendant had been previously convicted of another capital felony or had been previously adjudicated delinquent in a juvenile proceeding for committing an offense that would be a capital felony if committed by an adult.
- (3) The defendant had been previously convicted of a felony involving the use or threat of violence to the person or had been previously adjudicated delinquent in a juvenile proceeding for committing an offense that would be a Class A, B1, B2, C, D, or E felony involving the use or threat of violence to the person if the offense had been committed by an adult.
- (4) The capital felony was committed for the purpose of avoiding or preventing a lawful arrest or effecting an escape from custody.
- (5) The capital felony was committed while the defendant was engaged, or was an aider or abettor, in the commission of, or an attempt to commit, or flight after committing or attempting to commit, any homicide, robbery, rape or a sex offense, arson, burglary, kidnapping, or aircraft piracy or the unlawful throwing, placing, or discharging of a destructive device or bomb.
- (6) The capital felony was committed for pecuniary gain.
- (7) The capital felony was committed to disrupt or hinder the lawful exercise of any governmental function or the enforcement of laws.
- (8) The capital felony was committed against a law-enforcement officer, employee of the Department of Adult Correction, an employee of the Division of Juvenile Justice of the Department of Public Safety, jailer, fireman, judge or justice, former judge or justice, prosecutor or former prosecutor, juror or former juror, or witness or former witness against the defendant, while engaged in the performance of official duties or because of the exercise of official duty.
- (9) The capital felony was especially heinous, atrocious, or cruel.
- (10) The defendant knowingly created a great risk of death to more than one person by means of a weapon or device that would normally be hazardous to the lives of more than one person.
- (11) The murder for which the defendant stands convicted was part of a course of conduct in which the defendant engaged and that included the commission by the defendant of other crimes of violence against another person or persons.
- (12) The capital felony was committed by the defendant while the victim was using a public transportation system as defined in G.S. 160A-601.

(f) Mitigating Circumstances. – Mitigating circumstances that may be considered include, but are not limited to, the following:

- (1) The defendant has no significant history of prior criminal activity.
- (2) The capital felony was committed while the defendant was under the influence of mental or emotional disturbance.
- (3) The victim was a voluntary participant in the defendant's homicidal conduct or consented to the homicidal act.
- (4) The defendant was an accomplice in or accessory to the capital felony committed by another person and the defendant's participation was relatively minor.
- (5) The defendant acted under duress or under the domination of another person.
- (6) The capacity of the defendant to appreciate the criminality of the defendant's conduct or to conform that conduct to the requirements of law was impaired.
- (7) The age of the defendant at the time of the crime.
- (8) The defendant aided in the apprehension of another capital felon or testified truthfully on behalf of the prosecution in another prosecution of a felony.

- (9) Any other circumstance arising from the evidence that the jury deems to have mitigating value. (1977, c. 406, s. 2; 1979, c. 565, s. 1; c. 682, s. 9; 1981, c. 652, s. 1; 1994, Ex. Sess., c. 7, s. 5; 1995, c. 509, s. 14; 2001-81, s. 1; 2001-346, s. 2; 2011-145, s. 19.1(h); 2017-186, s. 2(eeee); 2018-47, s. 5; 2021-180, s. 19C.9(fff); 2023-54, s. 8; 2025-93, ss. 2(b), 6(b).)