

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.
- (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.

(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.)

§ 15A-2001. Capital offenses; plea of guilty.

(a) Any defendant who has been indicted for an offense punishable by death may enter a plea of guilty at any time after the indictment.

(b) If the defendant enters a guilty plea to first degree murder and the State has not given notice of intent to seek the death penalty as provided in G.S. 15A-2004 or the State has agreed to accept a sentence of life imprisonment where it initially gave notice of intent to seek the death penalty, then the court shall sentence the person to life imprisonment. The defendant may plead guilty to first degree murder and the State may agree to accept a sentence of life imprisonment, even if evidence of an aggravating circumstance exists.

(c) If the defendant enters a guilty plea to first degree murder and the State has given notice of its intent to seek the death penalty, then the court may sentence the defendant to life imprisonment or to death pursuant to the procedures of G.S. 15A-2000. Before sentencing the defendant in a case in which the State has given notice of its intent to seek the death penalty, the presiding judge shall impanel a jury for the limited purpose of hearing evidence and determining a sentence recommendation as to the appropriate sentence pursuant to G.S. 15A-2000. The jury's sentence recommendation in cases where the defendant pleads guilty and the State has given notice of its intent to seek the death penalty shall be determined under the same procedure of G.S. 15A-2000 applicable to defendants who have been tried and found guilty by a jury. (1977, c. 406, s. 2; 2001-81, s. 2.)

§ 15A-2002. Capital offenses; jury verdict and sentence.

If the recommendation of the jury is that the defendant be sentenced to death, the judge shall impose a sentence of death in accordance with the provisions of Chapter 15, Article 19 of the General Statutes. If the recommendation of the jury is that the defendant be imprisoned for life in the State's prison, the judge shall impose a sentence of imprisonment for life in the State's prison, without parole.

The judge shall instruct the jury, in words substantially equivalent to those of this section, that a sentence of life imprisonment means a sentence of life without parole. (1977, c. 406, s. 2; 1993, c. 538, s. 29; 1994, Ex. Sess., c. 21, s. 5; c. 24, s. 14(b).)

§ 15A-2003. Disability of trial judge.

In the event that the trial judge shall become disabled or unable to conduct the sentencing proceeding provided in this Article, the Chief Justice shall designate a judge to conduct such proceeding. (1977, c. 406, s. 2.)

§ 15A-2004. Prosecutorial discretion.

(a) The State, in its discretion, may elect to try a defendant capitally or noncapitally for first degree murder, even if evidence of an aggravating circumstance exists. The State may agree to accept a sentence of life imprisonment for a defendant at any point in the prosecution of a capital felony, even if evidence of an aggravating circumstance exists.

(b) A sentence of death may not be imposed upon a defendant convicted of a capital felony unless the State has given notice of its intent to seek the death penalty. Notice of intent to seek the death penalty shall be given to the defendant and filed with the court on or before the date of the pretrial conference in capital cases required by Rule 24 of the General Rules of Practice for the Superior and District Courts, or the arraignment, whichever is later. A court may discipline or sanction the State for failure to comply with the time requirements in Rule 24, but shall not declare a case as noncapital as a consequence of such failure. In addition to any discipline or sanctions the court may impose, the court shall continue the case for a sufficient time so that the defendant is not prejudiced by any delays in holding the hearing required by Rule 24.

(c) If the State has not given notice of its intent to seek the death penalty prior to trial, the trial shall be conducted as a noncapital proceeding, and the court, upon adjudication of the defendant's guilt of first degree murder, shall impose a sentence of life imprisonment.

(d) Notwithstanding any other provision of Article 100 of Chapter 15A of the General Statutes, the State may agree to accept a sentence of life imprisonment for a defendant upon remand from the Supreme Court of North Carolina of a capital case for resentencing or upon an order of resentencing by a court in a State or federal post-conviction proceeding. If the State exercises its discretion and does agree to accept a sentence of life imprisonment for the defendant, then the court shall impose a sentence of life imprisonment. (2001-81, s. 3; 2012-136, s. 2.)

§ 15A-2005. Intellectual disability; death sentence prohibited.

(a) (1) The following definitions apply in this section:

- a. Intellectual disability. – A condition marked by significantly subaverage general intellectual functioning, existing concurrently with significant limitations in adaptive functioning, both of which were manifested before the age of 18.
- b. Significant limitations in adaptive functioning. – Significant limitations in two or more of the following adaptive skill areas: communication, self-care, home living, social skills, community use, self-direction, health and safety, functional academics, leisure skills and work skills.
- c. Significantly subaverage general intellectual functioning. – An intelligence quotient of 70 or below.

(2) The defendant has the burden of proving significantly subaverage general intellectual functioning, significant limitations in adaptive functioning, and that intellectual disability was manifested before the age of 18. An intelligence quotient of 70 or below on an individually administered, scientifically recognized standardized intelligence quotient test administered by a licensed psychiatrist or psychologist is evidence of significantly subaverage general intellectual functioning; however, it is not sufficient, without evidence of significant limitations in adaptive functioning and without evidence of manifestation before the age of 18, to establish that the defendant has an

intellectual disability. An intelligence quotient of 70, as described in this subdivision, is approximate and a higher score resulting from the application of the standard error of measurement to an intelligence quotient of 70 shall not preclude the defendant from being able to present additional evidence of intellectual disability, including testimony regarding adaptive deficits. Accepted clinical standards for diagnosing significant limitations in intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior shall be applied in the determination of intellectual disability.

(b) Notwithstanding any provision of law to the contrary, no defendant with an intellectual disability shall be sentenced to death.

(c) Upon motion of the defendant, supported by appropriate affidavits, the court may order a pretrial hearing to determine if the defendant has an intellectual disability. The court shall order such a hearing with the consent of the State. The defendant has the burden of production and persuasion to demonstrate intellectual disability by clear and convincing evidence. If the court determines that the defendant has an intellectual disability, the court shall declare the case noncapital, and the State may not seek the death penalty against the defendant.

(d) The pretrial determination of the court shall not preclude the defendant from raising any legal defense during the trial.

(e) If the court does not find that the defendant has an intellectual disability in the pretrial proceeding, upon the introduction of evidence raising the issue of intellectual disability during the sentencing hearing, the court shall submit a special issue to the jury as to whether the defendant has an intellectual disability as defined in this section. This special issue shall be considered and answered by the jury prior to the consideration of aggravating or mitigating factors and the determination of sentence. If the jury determines that the defendant has an intellectual disability, the court shall declare the case noncapital and the defendant shall be sentenced to life imprisonment.

(f) The defendant has the burden of production and persuasion to demonstrate intellectual disability to the jury by a preponderance of the evidence.

(g) If the jury determines that the defendant does not have an intellectual disability as defined by this section, the jury may consider any evidence of intellectual disability presented during the sentencing hearing when determining aggravating or mitigating factors and the defendant's sentence.

(h) The provisions of this section do not preclude the sentencing of an offender with an intellectual disability to any other sentence authorized by G.S. 14-17 for the crime of murder in the first degree. (2001-346, s. 1; 2015-247, s. 5.)

§ 15A-2006: Expired pursuant to Session Laws 2001-346, s. 3, effective October 1, 2002.

§ 15A-2007: Reserved for future codification purposes.

§ 15A-2008: Reserved for future codification purposes.

§ 15A-2009: Reserved for future codification purposes.