



Death Penalty Information Center

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USE OF DEATH PENALTY DECLINES IN 2006

*Public Now Favors Life Without Parole
Lethal Injection Challenges Lead to Fewest Executions in a Decade
Death Sentences at 30-Year Low*

WASHINGTON, DC – For the first time in two decades, the Gallup Poll this year revealed that more Americans support the alternative sentence of life without parole over the death penalty as the proper punishment for murder. This result is in-step with the Death Penalty Information Center's (DPIC) 2006 Year End Report detailing a continuing trend away from capital punishment in the United States. In its report, DPIC notes that U.S. death sentences are now at an historic 30-year low, executions have sharply declined, and the size of death row has been dropping since 2000.

In the states this year, New Jersey became the first jurisdiction to enact a moratorium on executions through legislation and joined a lengthy list of states, including California and North Carolina, in forming a study commission to review the fairness and accuracy of the death penalty. New York legislators chose not to reinstate that jurisdiction's defunct death penalty. More changes may emerge in the coming years as a growing number of candidates who are opposed to the death penalty were elected to public office in 2006.

"The American public has turned an important corner in this debate. Support for the death penalty is on the decline and more people are embracing the alternative sentence of life without parole, which is now available in almost every state," said Richard Dieter, Executive Director of the Death Penalty Information Center. "Capital punishment is risky, expensive, and could result in irreversible error. Fewer people are now willing to put their faith in such a flawed policy."

In its report, DPIC noted that the number of executions in 2006 reached a 10-year low of 53, down 46% since its highpoint in 1999. Evidence that lethal injections could be causing needless and excruciating pain delayed a number of executions and led to a series of court hearings this year. Individual executions in Arkansas, California, Delaware, Maryland, Missouri, New Jersey, Ohio, South Dakota, and in the federal system were halted because of this issue.

The number of people sentenced to death annually has dropped by nearly 60% since 1999, falling from nearly 300 death sentences annually in the 1990s to a projected 114 death sentences this year. The size of death row decreased for the fifth consecutive year after 25 years of increases, declining from 3,415 last year to 3,366 in 2006.

The issue of innocence remained an important cornerstone of the death penalty debate in 2006 as an expanding list of judges, law enforcement officials, religious leaders, and other new voices joined in challenging capital punishment's implementation and accuracy. Former *Chicago Tribune* editor and publisher Jack Fuller echoed the concerns of many when he wrote: "[N]o government is good enough to entrust with the absolute power that capital punishment entails."

In August, the American Bar Association unanimously passed a resolution calling for an exemption from the death penalty for the severely mentally ill. An almost identical resolution had been endorsed earlier by such mental health groups as the American Psychiatric Association, the American Psychological Association, and the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill.

This is the twelfth *Year End Report* published by DPIC, a non-profit organization serving the media and the public with analysis and information on capital punishment. To receive a copy of the report or to schedule an interview with Richard Dieter or other experts who are willing to address topics covered in the 2006 review, please contact Brenda Bowser Soder at 301-906-4460, or call DPIC at 202-289-2275. To see additional graphs and links related to material in the report, see <http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/article.php?&did=2026>.

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