

DEATH PENALTY INFORMATION CENTER

1320 18th Street NW, 5th Floor, Washington, DC 20036

Phone:(202) 293-6970 ☎ Fax:(202) 822-4787 ☎ Email: dpic@deathpenaltyinfo.org

EMBARGOED UNTIL

12:01 a.m., FRIDAY, DECEMBER 19, 2003

CONTACT: Brenda Bowser

(202) 293-6970, cell (301) 906-4460

bbowser@deathpenaltyinfo.org

DEATH ROW POPULATION, EXECUTIONS, DEATH SENTENCES, PUBLIC SUPPORT ALL DECLINE IN 2003

DPIC's Year End Report Highlights Important Developments, Reforms, and the Increasing Isolation of the Death Penalty

WASHINGTON, DC -- A decline in executions, the size of death row, death sentences, and public support for capital punishment shaped a year of continuing concerns about the death penalty according to the Death Penalty Information Center's (DPIC) **2003 Year End Report**. The year also saw 10 death row exonerations, more regional isolation of the death penalty, and a growing movement within states and Congress to address the issues of unfairness and inaccuracy that continue to plague the death penalty.

"The decline in public support and the decrease in the use of the death penalty are strong indications that the mood has shifted on capital punishment," said Richard Dieter, DPIC Executive Director. "The death penalty is finally being examined more closely, and that review is long overdue."

Death sentences have declined for four straight years and appear to be declining further in 2003. Sentences are now down by almost 50% when compared to the number of death sentences in the late 1990s. The number of individuals on death row fell by about 5% this year, after decades of increase. Executions also declined in 2003 and are down 30% when compared to the 98 executions in 1999. Of the executions that did take place, only three were conducted outside of the south, which accounted for almost 90% of the executions this year.

Around the country, public support for capital punishment reached its lowest level in 25 years. An October Gallup Poll measured public support for the death penalty at 64%, down six percentage points from 2002 polling data.

Among other events shaping 2003 was former Illinois Governor George Ryan's historic commutation of all 171 inmates on Illinois's death row. These clemencies included four pardons based on innocence. In all, 10 men were exonerated from death row in 2003, a record-tying year for death row exonerations.

The risk of executing innocent people that is illustrated by these exonerations spurred legislative reform efforts in states such as Illinois, North Carolina and New Jersey, as well as in Congress. The U.S. House of Representatives passed a judicial reform package that contained funding for DNA testing and the improvement of legal representation. The bill will come before the U.S. Senate next year.

The Supreme Court continued to exercise closer scrutiny over the death penalty as it criticized both ineffective defense counsel and prosecutorial misconduct. Several new voices around the country emerged calling for the U.S. to either abandon capital punishment or halt executions. Charles B. Blackmar, for example, a senior judge of Missouri's Supreme Court, noted that the U.S. policy is a stark departure from the norms of our allies around the world. He stated, "Most nations that share our political and cultural traditions have done away with the death penalty...Nothing would be lost if death penalty statutes were repealed."

The 2003 Year End Report is the ninth of its kind published by the Death Penalty Information Center, a non-profit organization serving the media and the public with analysis and information on capital punishment.

#

NOTE: A copy of DPIC's 2003 Year End Report is attached for your review. The report will be available on DPIC's Web site on December 29th, 2003.