

Use of death penalty grows rarer in U.S.

by [Lauren Markoe](#) in the [January 23, 2013](#) issue

Though the number of death row inmates executed in 2012 remained unchanged from 2011 at 43, death penalty opponents say that capital punishment is on the wane.

Last year Connecticut upped to 17 the number of states to repeal the death penalty. And some states that have had relatively high numbers of executions in the past executed no one in 2012 or issued no new death sentences.

“Capital punishment is becoming marginalized and meaningless in most of the country,” said Richard Dieter, executive director of the Death Penalty Information Center, which released on December 18 a new study on the death penalty.

“In 2012, fewer states have the death penalty, fewer carried out executions, and death sentences and executions were clustered in a small number of states. It is very likely that more states will take up the question of death penalty repeal in the years ahead,” Dieter said.

Nine states executed death row inmates in 2012—led by Texas, which executed 15 people. Overall last year, four states—Texas, Oklahoma, Mississippi and Arizona—carried out more than three-quarters of all state executions. The year before, 13 states used the death penalty.

After the Supreme Court reinstated capital punishment in 1976, the execution rate reached a peak of 98 executions in 1999. Since then, the trend has been downward—attributed in part to some high-profile cases in which death row inmates have been found innocent after DNA testing.

After serving 15 years on death row, Damon Thibodeaux was freed in September from Louisiana State Penitentiary after DNA evidence cleared him of the crime. The 300th person exonerated by DNA evidence in the U.S., he had the help of the Innocence Project, a nonprofit that labors to free the wrongly convicted.

Such cases “open the eyes of everyone that there are some mistakes in the system that need to be fixed,” said Paul Cates, spokesman for the Innocence Project. “And this has critical consequences when you are talking about the use of the death penalty.”

Some polls show falling public support for the death penalty. In an October 2011 CNN poll, 50 percent of respondents said they would prefer a sentence of life without parole over the death penalty for murderers—the first time that happened in CNN polling.

The poll also found that a large majority of Americans—72 percent—believed that an innocent person had been put to death in the past five years.

Though some victims’ rights groups say lower execution rates have more to do with falling murder rates than with growing revulsion toward the death penalty, the Catholic Church, a strong opponent of the death penalty, hailed the latest DPIC report as a strengthening of the anti-death penalty movement.

“The trend away from use of the death penalty is a hopeful sign that we are moving in the right direction on this issue,” said Anthony Granado, a policy adviser in the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. —RNS

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