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DEATH PENALTY INFORMATION CENTER

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STATEMENT BY ROBERT DUNHAM, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE DEATH PENALTY INFORMATION CENTER ON COLORADO'S ABOLITION OF CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

- Colorado becomes 22nd state to abolish the death penalty.
- "Colorado is following the trend that we're seeing in the West, which is a steady movement away from the death penalty -- first in practice, and then in abolition.

With Governor Jared Polis's signature this afternoon, Colorado became the 22nd U.S. state to abolish the death penalty and the tenth in the past decade-and-a-half.

Colorado's action exemplifies the trend we are seeing in states across the country, which is a continuing movement away from capital punishment, first in practice, then in law. Half of U.S. states have either abolished the death penalty or have imposed moratoria on executions. Two thirds either no longer authorize capital punishment or have not executed anyone in more than a decade. New death sentences are down nearly 90% since the mid 1990s and executions have declined by 75% since the turn of the century. And more than 80% of U.S. counties have no one on death row and have not executed anyone in the past half century.

The trend away from the death penalty has been particularly strong in the West in recent years. Governors in Colorado, Washington, Oregon, and California have all halted executions. Washington and Colorado have gone on to judicially or legislatively abolish the death penalty and Oregon has significantly restricted its scope. No state west of Texas has carried out an execution in the past five years and fewer new death sentences were imposed in those states last year than in any year since California brought back its death penalty in the late 1970s.

That is not a surprise. Public support for capital punishment has been thinning and is near a generation low. America's views of criminal justice have experienced a sea change and in state legislatures, the issue has become increasingly bipartisan. And as legislators have shifted from viewing the death penalty as an instrument of politics and have increasingly subjected it to the same type of scrutiny afforded other government programs, we have seen significant legislative movement towards abolition across the country.

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Growing numbers of legislators have criticized the high cost of capital punishment, the inherent risk of convicting and executing the innocent, the continuing racial, geographic, and economic disparities in the way it is applied, and the untrustworthiness of states to carry it out fairly, consistently, or in a principled manner. As Governor Polis noted in his statement today, "the death penalty cannot be, and never has been, administered equitably in the State of Colorado."

Colorado's legislators engaged in heartfelt, respectful, and good-faith debate on very sensitive issues. In the end, they based their decision on the evidence and what each legislator individually believed in his or her heart was right for the people of the state. Governor Polis recognized that, as distateful as the crimes were that resulted in the three remaining death sentences in the state, it was better to close out this chapter in Colorado's criminal justice history than to let the issue fester while unnecessarily spending millions more of taxpayer dollars.

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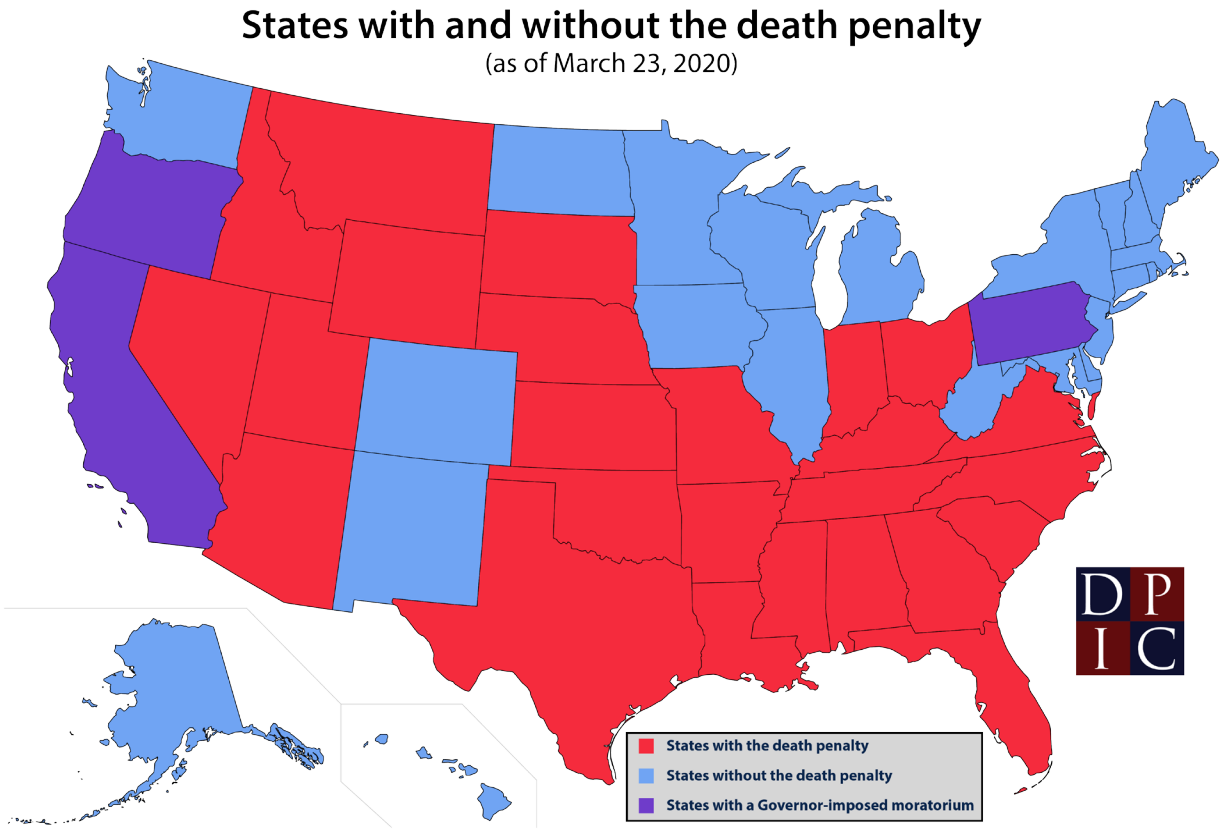
Below: the new DPIC map of states with and without the death penalty.



The Death Penalty Information Center is a national nonprofit organization serving the media and the public with analysis and information on issues concerning capital punishment. DPIC was founded in 1990 and prepares in-depth reports, issues press releases, conducts briefings for the media, and serves as a resource to those working on this issue. DPIC does not take a position for or against capital punishment itself but has been critical of the manner in which it is administered.