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Contact: Margot Friedman at 202-330-9295 (c) or 202-332-5550 or
mfriedman@dupontcirclecommunications.com
http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/ Twitter: @DPInfoCtr @RDunhamDPIC

Death Penalty Erodes Further in 2019 as New Hampshire Abolishes and California Imposes Moratorium

For Fifth Consecutive Year, U.S. Sees Fewer Than 30 Executions and Fewer Than 50 Death Sentences, and Gallup Shows for the First Time a Majority (60%) Prefer Life Without Parole Over the Death Penalty

(Washington, D.C.) The U.S. death penalty continued to erode in 2019, as New Hampshire became the 21st state to abolish capital punishment and California put all executions on hold. With Indiana reaching the ten-year mark since its last execution, 32 U.S. states have now either abolished the death penalty or not carried out an execution in more than a decade, according to a report released today by the Death Penalty Information Center (DPIC).

DPIC reported that use of the death penalty remained near historic lows in 2019, with 22 executions, and a current count of 33 new death sentences, both down from 2018. (With several penalty decisions still pending, there will not be a final number of death sentences before the report is published.) It will be the fifth consecutive year with fewer than 30 executions and fewer than 50 death sentences. Death sentences have declined by more than 85% and executions by more than 75% from their peaks in the 1990s, the report said. The federal government's attempt to resume executions after a 16-year hiatus stood in stark contrast to the states' continuing trend away from capital punishment.

Issues of innocence remained at the forefront of death-penalty news this year. "2019 came close to being the year of executing the innocent," said Robert Dunham, DPIC's executive director and the lead author of *The Death Penalty in 2019: Year End Report*. "Two prisoners were executed this year despite substantial doubts as to their guilt, and James Dailey in Florida and Rodney Reed in Texas came close to execution despite compelling evidence of innocence. Our courts and public officials too frequently flat out ignore potentially deadly mistakes, and often take steps to obstruct the truth," Dunham said. "That is one of the reasons why public support for the death penalty continues to fall."

The death penalty continued to grow geographically isolated. Only seven states carried out executions: Texas (9 or 41% of all executions); Tennessee (3); Alabama (3); Georgia (3); Florida (2); South Dakota (1); and Missouri (1). Of the 65 scheduled execution dates set in 2019, nearly two-thirds (66%) did not go forward. For the fifth consecutive year, no state west of Texas conducted an execution.

At this writing, only eight states imposed more than one death sentence in 2019: Florida (6); Ohio (6); Texas (4); Alabama (3); California (3); North Carolina (3); Pennsylvania (2); and South Carolina (2). Fewer than one percent of counties imposed death sentences in 2019, with Cuyahoga County (Cleveland, Ohio) imposing the most (3) and Riverside, California ranking second (2). Georgia imposed a death sentence for the first time in five years, after the trial court permitted Tiffany Moss, a defendant with brain damage, to represent herself and she presented no defense at either the guilt or penalty phases of her trial.

For the first time since Gallup began asking the question in 1985, a majority of respondents (60%) believe that life in prison without parole is a better approach for punishing murder than the death penalty. The poll reported a significant shift toward life over the past five years among every demographic group questioned, including Democrats, Republicans, and Independents. Support for capital punishment remained near a 47-year low in a second question asking respondents whether or not they favored the death penalty.

To speak with Robert Dunham, DPIC's Executive Director, please contact Chloe Madvig at cmadvig@deathpenaltyinfo.org or 202-289-4022.

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The Death Penalty Information Center (www.deathpenaltyinfo.org) is a non-profit 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.