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Report: Executions rise as death sentences decline

by Eric Velasco by Religion News Service

The number of state-sponsored executions jumped 41 percent in 2009 even as the number of death penalty sentences dropped, according to a new report from the Washington-based Death Penalty Information Center.

Last year's 52 executions nationwide represented a 41 percent increase from the 37 executions in 2008, the DPIC said in its annual report on capital punishment trends.

Much of that increase was due to the end of an eight-month informal moratorium on executions nationally through mid-2008, while the U.S. Supreme Court considered a case on methods used in lethal injection, said Richard Dieter, executive director of the DPIC.

"The rise in 2009 was expected as states were backlogged with cases," he said. "But the country continues to move away from the death penalty. This decade has been marked by a declining use of the death penalty."

Fewer death sentences were imposed by courts nationwide in 2009 than in any year since 1976, when states began operating under new laws after the U.S. Supreme Court struck down most death penalty laws in 1972.

The 106 death sentences issued nationwide in 2009 marked the seventh year of decline, and were 68 percent fewer than the 328 death sentences imposed in the peak year, 1994, the DPIC reported.

The decline nationally in death sentences has been greatest in Texas, which added life without parole as an alternative to death sentences in 2005, the DPIC reported. Texas, the nation's historical leader in the use of the death penalty, averaged 34 death sentences per year during the 1990s. Last year, Texas sentenced nine to die, the DPIC reported.

In Alabama, which ranked No. 2 in 2009, judges ordered nine death sentences in 2009, versus 13 in 2008.

"It's a reflection of skepticism about the death penalty," Dieter said. "When juries see strong alternatives like life without parole, they often view that as sufficient punishment."

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