



Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development Office of Domestic Social Development

DEATH PENALTY February 2009

ISSUE

The trends in the use of the death penalty and support for the use of death penalty in the United States continue to move in positive directions. In 2008, the fewest number of people were sentenced to death (111), continuing the downward trend since 1993. Only nine states carried out executions in 2007. The total number of executions in 2008 was 37, reflecting a continuing downward trend. The number of people on the nation's death rows decreased for the seventh consecutive year (to 3,309), after 25 years of steady increases and is the smallest number since the Supreme Court reinstated capital punishment 30 years ago. According to a May 2006 Gallup poll, more Americans now support life sentence without parole as punishment for murder rather than the use of the death penalty.

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

New Jersey repealed its death penalty law on December 17, 2007. In signing the bill, Governor Corzine thanked the New Jersey Catholic Conference and other groups saying they "created a fundamental grassroots groundswell that put pressure on those of us in public service to stand up and do the right thing." This is the first state legislative abolition of the death penalty since it was reinstated in 1976. As of this writing, bills to end capital punishment have been introduced in at least eight states: Nebraska, Colorado, New Mexico, Montana, New Hampshire, Maryland, Washington, and Kansas. Maryland, Montana, and New Mexico have all made significant legislative process passing their bills.

Two states, Virginia and Georgia, have introduced bills in the state legislature to expand the use of the death penalty, and Utah has a bill introduced in the legislature to restrict post-conviction appeals. Alaska has introduced a bill to reinstate the death penalty.

SUPREME COURT ACTION

The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Baze vs. Rees* that the use of lethal injection in executions did not violate the Eighth Amendment's ban on cruel and unusual punishment. The case had been filed by two Kentucky death row inmates, Ralph Baze and Thomas Clyde Bowling, Jr. The two men sued Kentucky in 2004, claiming that the state's lethal injection process amounts to cruel and unusual punishment, noting that the procedure can inflict unnecessary pain and suffering on the inmate. The Court's ruling in the case on April 16, 2008, lifted what had in effect been a moratorium on executions by lethal injection.

USCCB POSITION

Since 1980, the Catholic bishops in the United States have taken a strong and principled position against the use of the death penalty in the United States. The Catholic Church opposes the use of the death penalty not just for what it does to those guilty of horrible crimes, but for how it diminishes all of us and society as a whole. In November 2005, the bishops affirmed this position in their statement *A Culture of Life and the Penalty of Death*. This statement is the foundation of an ongoing and comprehensive Catholic Campaign to End the Use of the Death Penalty. Moreover, Pope John Paul II, in both *The Gospel of Life* and the revised *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, stated that our society has adequate alternative means today to protect society from violent crime without resorting to capital punishment.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Get involved in efforts to restrict, restrain and end the use of the death penalty at the state and federal levels. To find other advocates in your local community, contact your State Catholic Conference (nascd.org); National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty (nacdp.org); and Equal Justice USA (equaljusticeusa.org).
- Use the newly update resources and materials available for The Catholic Campaign to End the Use of the Death Penalty (see: usccb.org/deathpenalty).
- Consider joining the Catholic grassroots movement, Catholic Mobilizing Network to End the Use of the Death Penalty (catholicmobilizing.org), or join their Facebook group.

For more information, contact

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