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Fears of making a mistake contribute to drop in death sentences, executions

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The number of death sentences handed out in the United States dropped in 2006 to the lowest level since capital punishment was reinstated 30 years ago, reflecting what some experts say is a growing fear that the criminal-justice system will make a tragic and irreversible mistake.

Executions fell, too, to the fewest in a decade.

"The death penalty is on the defensive," said Richard Dieter, director of the Death Penalty Information Center, a Washington organization that looks at problems with the capital-punishment system.

Death sentences fell in 2006 to 114 or fewer, according to an estimate from the group. That is down from 128 in 2005, and even lower than the 137 sentences the year after the U.S. Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty in 1976. It is also down sharply from the high of 317 in 1996.

Fifty-three executions were carried out in 2006, down from 60 in 2005. Executions over the past three decades peaked at 98 in 1999. Among the many causes given by prosecutors, lawyers and death penalty critics: the passage of more state laws that allow juries to impose life without parole; an overall drop in violent crime; and a reluctance among some authorities to pursue the death penalty because of the high costs of prosecuting a capital case.

But above all, many said, is the possibility of a mistake, made dramatically clear in recent years. Since the death penalty was reinstated, 123 people have been freed from death row after significant questions were raised about their convictions — 14 of them through DNA testing, according to the Death Penalty Information Center.

"The fact is they've gotten a lot of the wrong guys," said Deborah Fleischaker, director of the American Bar Association's Death Penalty Moratorium Implementation Project. "There's no question that has, in the public, created a lot of doubt about how the death penalty is working."

local angle

Here are the number of inmates that were sent to death row at the Arizona Department of Corrections for these years. There are more than 100 people on Arizona's death row.

- 2006: 6
- 2005: 6
- 2004: 7
- 2003: 7
- 2002: 0

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Source: Arizona DOC Web site

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