

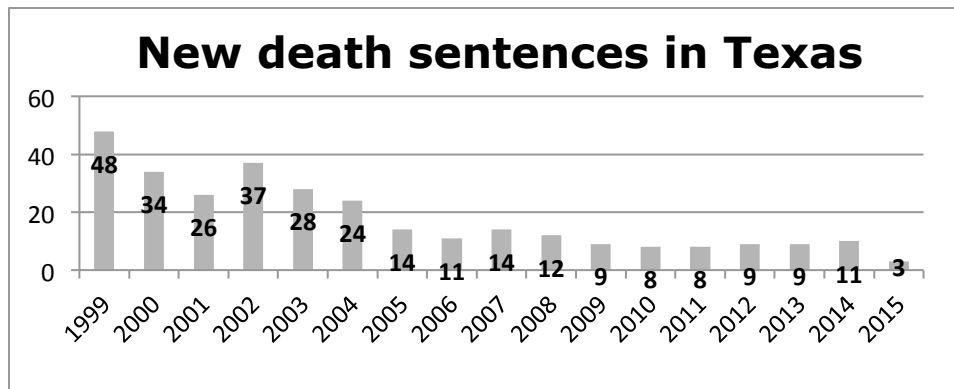
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**Wednesday, December 16, 2015, 12:01 AM CDT**

CONTACT: Kristin Houlé, Executive Director
512-552-5948 (cell); 512-441-1808 (office)
khoule@tcadp.org

Death sentences in Texas drop to lowest level on record

Juries reject the death penalty in more cases than they impose it

(Austin, Texas) — This year, jurors in Texas imposed the fewest new death sentences since the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the state's revised capital punishment statute in 1976. According to the Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty's (TCADP) new report, [Texas Death Penalty Developments in 2015: The Year in Review](#), juries newly condemned three individuals to death. They rejected the death penalty in four other trials. The first death sentence of the year was not imposed until October 7, 2015.



"The death penalty landscape has shifted dramatically in Texas over the last 15 years, mirroring national trends. Texas has gone from a peak of 48 new death sentences in 1999 to the fewest sentences on record," said Kristin Houlé, TCADP Executive Director.

Use of the death penalty remains geographically isolated. Just eight counties – 3% of the 254 counties in Texas – account for 70% of new death sentences since 2011. This is the first year that jurors in Harris, Dallas, and Tarrant Counties were not responsible for any new death sentences, however. These three counties, along with Bexar County, account for half of the death sentences imposed in the state of Texas since 1974.

Notably, this also is the first year that an African-American defendant did not face the death penalty in Texas. Over the last five years, nearly 60% of all new death sentences in Texas have been imposed on African-Americans.

Of the three men sentenced to death this year, one is white, one is Asian, and one is Hispanic. All of their cases involved a single white murder victim.

Death-qualified juries rejected the death penalty in four other capital murder trials this year, including two in Nueces County. Three of the four cases involved multiple murder victims; all four defendants are Hispanic. They were sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole.

While the State of Texas mirrors declining sentencing trends nationwide and has executed fewer people in recent years, it remains the nation's most active death penalty state. This year, Texas accounted for almost half of all U.S. executions, putting 13 people to death. More information on national death penalty developments is available here: <http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/YearEnd2015>.

Several of the men executed in Texas this year were barely legal adults at the time of the crime. Others were executed despite evidence of their intellectual disabilities or severe mental illness. In one particularly troubling case, the state put Lester Bower to death 31 years after his conviction and in spite of compelling evidence of his innocence. He was the oldest person executed by the State of Texas.

Of the 13 men put to death this year, six were Hispanic, four were African-American, and three were white.

Nearly as many individuals who were scheduled for execution this year received reprieves. Eight stays of execution came from the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals (CCA), the state's highest criminal court. In four other cases, state district judges withdrew execution dates.

"The cases of individuals scheduled for execution this year illustrate the deep flaws that continue to plague our state's capital punishment system," said Kathryn Kase, Executive Director of the Texas Defender Service. "These cases do not reflect the current death penalty landscape but rather death penalty practices from a different era."

During the 84th Texas Legislature, lawmakers considered numerous bills related to capital punishment. Several critical bills aimed at improving the fairness and accuracy of the criminal justice system were signed into law by Governor Greg Abbott, including bills establishing an innocence commission to examine cases of wrongful conviction, increasing access to post-conviction DNA testing, and overhauling the grand jury system. In addition, lawmakers unanimously passed legislation requiring notice of the scheduling of an execution date and the issuance of execution warrants.

Legislators also passed a bill that keeps secret the identity of any persons or entities providing the drugs used in Texas executions. Officials with the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) continue to obtain and use compounded pentobarbital from an unidentified source,

raising constitutional concerns about the quality and efficacy of these drugs, and about the transparency of the execution process itself.

Other highlights of [*Texas Death Penalty Developments in 2015: The Year in Review*](#):

- Alfred Dewayne Brown became the 13th individual to be exonerated and released from death row in Texas. On June 8, 2015, the Harris County District Attorney's Office dismissed capital murder charges against him after determining there was insufficient evidence to support another conviction. The Texas Court of Criminal Appeals overturned his conviction last year.
- As of November 19, 2015, TDCJ counted 252 death row inmates, which includes 6 women. This is the lowest Texas death row population since 1987. More than one-third of these individuals were convicted in Harris County.

"Attitudes toward the death penalty are shifting as public confidence in the criminal justice system erodes," said Kristin Houlé. "At this critical moment in our state's experience with the death penalty, concerned citizens and elected officials should take a close look at the realities of this irreversible, arbitrary, and costly punishment and consider alternative ways of achieving justice."

TCADP is a statewide, grassroots advocacy organization based in Austin.

###

Texas Death Penalty Developments in 2015: The Year in Review is available online at <http://tcadp.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Texas-Death-Penalty-Developments-in-2015.pdf>. Contact report author Kristin Houlé at khoule@tcadp.org to receive a copy directly via email. See the report for additional tables illustrating trends regarding executions and death sentences.

Maps illustrating death sentences by county are available at <http://tcadp.org/get-informed/death-sentences-by-county/1976-2015-county-map/> and <http://tcadp.org/get-informed/death-sentences-by-county/2011-2015-new-death-sentences/>.

Information on national death penalty developments is available in a new report from the Death Penalty Information Center: <http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/YearEnd2015>.