

## Executions drop to lowest level in two decades

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WASHINGTON (RNS) Driven in part by continuing legal disputes related to lethal injection drugs and state moratoriums on the death penalty, the 35 people executed in the U.S. this year marks the fewest in two decades, according to a year-end report by the Death Penalty Information Center.

The center, which opposes capital punishment, also found that the 72 death sentences issued in 2014 represents the fewest in 40 years.

“What’s going on here is that we are seeing capital punishment slipping into irrelevance as a criminal justice tool,” said Richard Dieter, the center’s executive director. “The country is rethinking this as an effective remedy.”

The declining numbers come as several states and the federal government are locked in disputes over their use of lethal injection drugs. The state of Oklahoma halted executions for the remainder of 2014 after a botched execution in April. The federal government, involved in a legal challenge to its lethal injection protocol, has not used its execution chamber since 2003.

Perhaps most striking about the 2014 report, Dieter said, was that Texas—the nation’s perennial leader in carrying out the death penalty—was no longer alone at the top after 17 years. It tied with Missouri for the most executions, with 10. Meanwhile, the seven states that carried out executions this year marked the lowest number in 25 years.

Connecticut state representative David Labriola, a Republican who helped lead an unsuccessful fight to maintain capital punishment in that state, believes there is strong national support for the death penalty, as long as it is applied fairly and efficiently.

But Labriola said there has been public “frustration” with an often protracted appeal process and the costs associated with supporting the legal challenges of the condemned.

“It can take more than 20 years to resolve some of these cases,” Labriola said. “I continue to support the death penalty because I believe there are some crimes so heinous, that is the only appropriate punishment. Had Adam Lanza not turned the gun on himself, he would have surely qualified for the death penalty.”

Lanza killed 26 people in the 2012 Newtown, Connecticut, school massacre.

“If you are going to have the death penalty,” Labriola said, “it has to be a working death penalty.”