

## DEATH PENALTY SENTENCING IN DECLINE ACROSS UNITED STATES

### California, Los Angeles Fall Back in National Trend Toward Permanent Imprisonment

San Francisco – As the United States moves away from death sentences to permanent imprisonment, California—particularly Los Angeles County—lags behind, according to a new report on the death penalty by the ACLU of Northern California (ACLU-NC). In 2009, the number of new death sentences nationwide reached the lowest level since the death penalty was reinstated in 1976. The Golden State, however, sent more people to death row last year than in the seven preceding years. At the close of 2009, California’s death row was the largest and most costly in the United States.

“Nationwide, we are seeing a shift due to growing concerns about the wrongful conviction of innocent people and the high costs of the death penalty in comparison to permanent imprisonment,” said Natasha Minsker, death penalty policy director for ACLU-NC. “States like Texas, which used to rival California in the number of new death sentences, have seen a dramatic reduction in use of the death penalty since permanent imprisonment became an option.”

The increase in death sentences in California last year was caused by the high number of new death sentences in just three counties, according to the report. The majority of counties in California, like the rest of the nation, have effectively replaced the death penalty. Prosecutorial practices in just three “killer counties”— Los Angeles, Orange and Riverside – accounted for 83% of death sentences in 2009, while those counties represented only 41% of the state’s population.

Los Angeles showed the most dramatic break from national trends, ranking as the top death penalty county in the United States. Los Angeles County sent more people to death row in 2009 than in any other year this decade—and more than the entire state of Texas for the same period.

The ACLU report also found a dramatic increase in the number of Latinos sentenced to death in California. The percentage of Latinos on death row has historically been well below the percentage of Latinos in the California population.

“We don’t know what is driving this increase in the number of Latinos sentenced to death--unfortunately the state does not collect the data needed to answer this important question,” said Ramona Ripston, executive director of the ACLU of Southern California. “What we do know is that all California communities would be better served if California opted for permanent imprisonment as a safe and cost-effective alternative to the death penalty.”

The report notes that California will be forced to spend \$1 billion on the death penalty in the next five years unless the state replaces the death penalty with permanent imprisonment.

“At a time of fiscal crisis, permanent imprisonment is a better alternative that would punish serious offenders while saving the state millions that could be shifted to schools in desperate need of funds,” said Denise Serrano, Education and Advocacy Associate at the ACLU of San Diego and Imperial Counties.