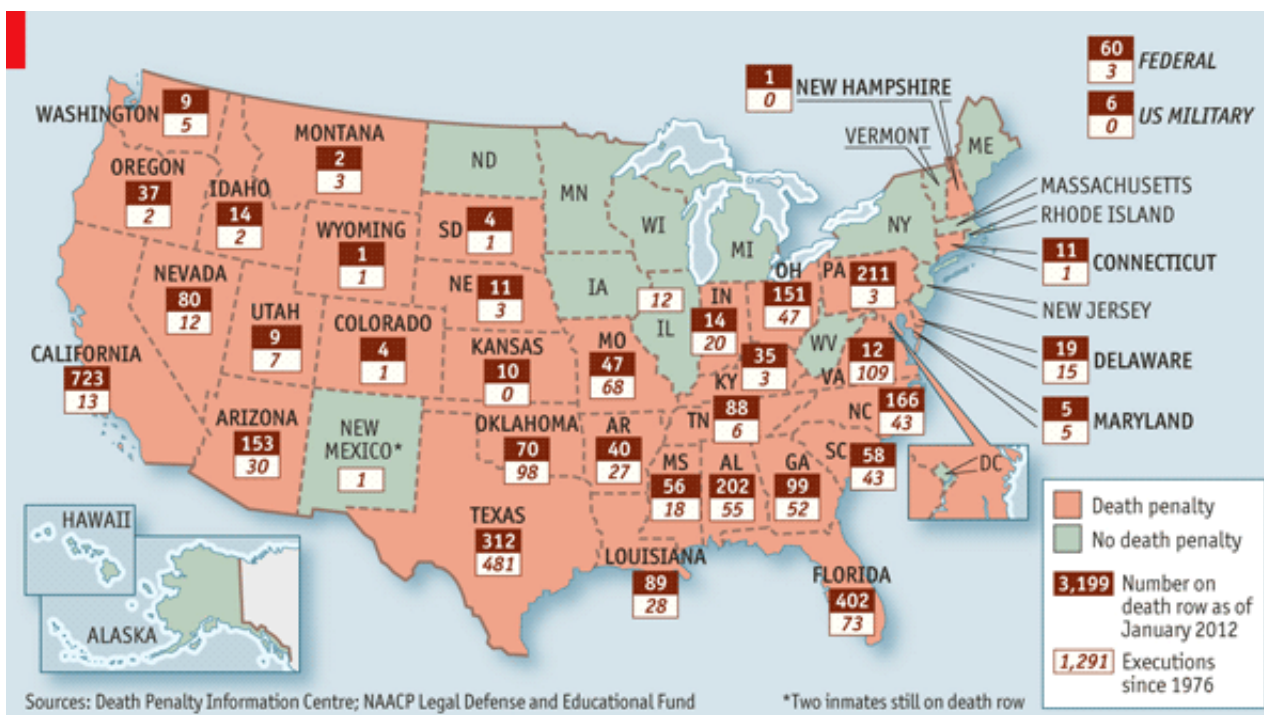




The death penalty Another reprieve

Connecticut is to repeal capital punishment, part of a growing trend

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CAPITAL punishment has been meted out in Connecticut since colonial times, when convicted witches were sentenced to death. In recent years it has been used sparingly. Of the 4,686 murders committed between 1973 and 2007, only 66 led to convictions of a capital felony, according to a 2011 study of capital punishment in Connecticut by John Donohue of Stanford Law School. And only nine of the culprits actually received the death sentence. Indeed, the execution in 2005 of Michael Ross, a serial killer who waived

further appeals, was the first since 1960. Eleven people are in various stages of appeal on death row, including two who have been there for two decades. "Keeping it without using it doesn't make a lot of sense," notes Richard Dieter, head of the Death Penalty Information Centre.

Connecticut lawmakers agree, including some Republicans. Earlier this month the state's two legislative chambers voted to repeal capital punishment. Dannel Malloy, the governor, has pledged to sign the bill when it reaches his desk, perhaps as soon as next week. But Arthur O'Neill, a Republican state legislator, wants to put the matter to the people and has asked the governor to schedule a referendum.

He points to polls which indicate that a majority of voters in Connecticut, a Democratic state, support the death penalty. This is partly because of the notorious "Cheshire murders" case of 2007, which is still on the public's mind. A mother and her daughters, aged 17 and 11, were murdered at their home. The mother was raped; the younger daughter was sexually assaulted. The invaders, Steven Hayes and Joshua Komisarjevsky, both out on parole, then set the house on fire. Hayes was sentenced to death in December 2010. Komisarjevsky, his accomplice, was sentenced to death in January. Both are still alive.

Connecticut will be the 17th state to abolish the death penalty and the fifth to do so in the past five years. Nor is it likely to be the last: other states are reconsidering capital punishment. Repeal bills have been proposed in a number of states, including (unsuccessfully) Florida, which has 402 people on death row. In November Californian voters will vote on whether to repeal their death penalty. Kentucky's House of Representatives recently passed a measure setting up a body to review and reform the

death penalty. Pennsylvania and Oregon are also reviewing their death-penalty laws, and Georgia and Delaware this week each granted a stays of execution in a murder case. For six months Ohio had an unofficial moratorium because the state failed to follow its execution protocols. But a judge has now allowed the resumption of capital punishment. The first execution after the pause took place on April 18th.

The fear of executing innocent people is helping drive the trend for repeal. Between 2000 and 2011 an average of five people on death rows were exonerated each year. This is no small thing in a country where 3,199 people sit on death row and where only a few months ago Rick Perry, the governor of Texas, was cheered during an election debate when he bragged about executing criminals. But Texas is unlikely to change its policy in the near future. And in Connecticut, despite the change in the law, those on death row will remain there.

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