

# Criminal Justice Reform

America's overcrowded jails and prisons, disproportionately populated by African Americans, Latino's and other minorities, is one of the greatest civil rights issues of our time. More citizens are incarcerated daily in the United States than in any other country in the world. Over 2.2 million people are currently incarcerated for a range of offenses, many of them non-violent. The criminal justice system has strayed from its function as a rehabilitative institution and must be reformed.

Racism and classism are keenly felt by those living in inner city areas in America – a reality that is institutionalized through “racial profiling” by urban police forces. Stop and frisk policies, routine traffic stops that escalate to arrest, as well as the hundreds of civil fines written by police officers are just a few of the examples of the disproportionate policing in communities of color. Many police officers abuse the power of their badges and use it to justify excessive use of force on the very citizens whom they are sworn to protect. Far too often, innocent civilians in low income areas are the victims of violent crime. These individuals' resources and means of survival are already challenged, resulting in higher rates of violence and crimes in these areas.

One reason for the increase in prison populations is the enormous incarceration rate for low risk, first time offenders of nonviolent drug offenses. Another major cause is the lack of support systems to make a smooth transition back into society. This causes many people to be return to a life of crime and often to return to prison.

Another sign of a broken system is unbalanced sentencing. Many minorities and people from poor economic communities can't afford proper legal representation. These individuals are left with new, inexperienced and/or incompetent public defenders to plead their cases. With no real legal defense, these low income citizens are tried and convicted of the crimes that are frequently first offences or encouraged to plead out and take whatever deal the prosecution gives. Frequently a prison sentence is handed down rather than probation for first time offenders for nonviolent drug possession and often these sentences are given maximum sentences, changing their lives forever.

Once an individual becomes a ward of the state, he or she becomes the financial responsibility of the taxpayers. The average cost of incarceration was \$31,307 per year per prisoner in 2010, a figure that has only grown over the past 6 years. Taxpayers also pay for probation and other release programs, which cost \$33.5 billion in 2012.

Statistics show that violent crimes have fallen dramatically yet the incarceration rate keeps going up in the United States. As of 2015 the United States has the prisoner rate of 698 prisoners per 100,000 of the nation's population compared to 411 prisoners per 100,000 in 1995. Our criminal system was not built to handle this influx of prisoners, so overcrowding has become a significant problem. Because of overcrowding, we now build twice as many prisons as educational institutions each year.

The discrimination against the economically challenged and minorities displayed in courts, police policies, and lack of adequate legal representation and unbalanced sentencing demands Criminal Justice Reform now. This is why President Obama signed an executive order banning criminal records questions on job applications. Criminal justice reform is one of President Obama's top priorities. It is also a priority for members of Congress and the Senate. The Senate Judiciary Committee voted 15-5 in favor of sending the bipartisan Sentencing Reform and Correction Act to the floor. The Fair Sentencing Act of 2010 should be applied retroactive for crack cocaine offenders who were sentenced before August 3, 2010. Federal prisoners should be allowed to earn time credits for completing rehabilitation programs and redeem credits for time served and allow them to transfer to other types of supervised facilities like half way houses.

It is time for reform in all areas of the Justice System. Let's stop senselessly overcrowding the prison system with nonviolent criminals and subjecting them to survival amongst violent offenders. Let's focus on more creative ways for nonviolent offenders to be rehabilitated so they can become productive citizens in our communities and keep the violent criminal where they belong, in prisons. Better yet let's make education and jobs a greater priority than building more prisons.