

The Interfaith Witness for Criminal Justice Reform

Because we are followers of Jesus, we are called to be present as ambassadors of healing, restoration, and justice in jail cells, courtrooms, and detention centers.

Written by Barbara Baylor



Together we are Working for Justice

The United States is the world's leader in incarceration with 2.2 million people currently in the nation's prisons or jails -- a 500% increase over the past thirty years.¹ While the United States comprises 5% of the total global population; it alone accounts for a staggering 25% of the world's prison population. Of the 2.2 million people currently incarcerated in U.S. prison and jails, more than 60% are racial and ethnic minorities.²

In the last several years, there has been growing public dialogue about the need to reform harsh federal sentencing laws, which are a central factor in the explosion of the federal prison population. The U.S. Department of Justice supports reforming mandatory minimum drug sentences, and President Obama has publicly encouraged Congress to pass reforms to mandatory minimum sentencing.

Members in both chambers of Congress are working together to pass bipartisan sentencing reform bills that include "front-end" reforms, like those that would reduce excessive mandatory minimum sentences for some drug crimes or promote alternatives to incarceration for nonviolent, low-level drug offenses. Others have focused on "back-end" fixes, like those which would increase opportunities for earned-time credit through education and job training programs to allowing certain prisoners early release.

Zechariah 9:12

"And you, because of my blood covenant with you, I'll release your prisoners from their hopeless cells. Come home, hope-filled prisoners!"



Other proposed reform measures would improve reentry programs for returning citizens and remove barriers to employment, housing, student loans, federal assistance, and voting. An additional area of criminal justice reform would focus on reforming the juvenile justice system by investing in alternatives to juvenile incarceration and prevention programs, and by addressing the disproportionate representation of youth of color in the juvenile justice system.

A broad and growing spectrum of progressive and conservative advocacy groups are coming together to advance criminal justice policy reform. Faith leaders are critical to this movement.

The United Church of Christ, Justice and Witness Ministries participates in an interfaith coalition of more than 40 faith groups engaged in public policy education and advocacy for criminal justice reform. Earlier this year, the Interfaith Coalition on Criminal Justice sent a letter to Senate Judiciary Committee outlining key principles necessary for broad-based criminal justice reform. Together we called on our leaders to:

- Restore proportionality to drug sentencing;
- Promote and adequately fund recidivism reduction and reentry programming;
- Make sentencing reductions retroactive;
- Expand the Bureau of Prison's Compassionate Release Program
- Expand time credits for positive behavior

Criminal Justice Reform Measures under consideration in the 114th Congress:

1. **Smarter Sentencing Act**
S. 502/H.R. 920
Senators Mike Lee (R-UT) and Dick Durbin (D-IL)
Representatives Paul Labrador (R-ID) and Bobby Scott (D-A)
2. **The REEDEM Act**
S. 675
Senators Rand Paul (R-KY) and Cory Booker (D-NJ)
3. **Corrections Act**
S. 647
Senators John Cornyn (R-TX) and Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI)
4. **The Justice Safety Valve Act**
S. 353/H. R. 706
Senators Rand Paul (R-KY) and Patrick Leahy (D-VT)
5. **The Second Chance Reauthorization**
Representative Danny Davis (D-IL) and Senator Patrick Leahy (D-VT)
6. **The Democracy Restoration Act**
S. 772/H.R. 1459
Senator Ben Cardin (D-MD) and Representative John Conyers (D-MI)
7. **Better Options for Kids Act**
Senator Chris Murphy (D-CT) and Cory Booker (D-NJ)
Representatives Thomas Massie (R-KY) and Bobby Scott (D-VA)
8. **Youth PROMISE Act**
Representatives Bobby Scott (D-VA) and Walter Jones (R-NC)
9. **Reauthorization of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act**
Senators Chuck Grassley (R-IA) and Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI)

¹ U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics Prisoners Series

² U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. U.S. Census Bureau