

# WITNESS FOR JUSTICE

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## Witness for Justice #532

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**Enough.**

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**Minister for Criminal Justice and Human Rights**

One out of every 32 adults in the United States is in prison or on probation or parole -- a convicted criminal under judicial control. This does not account for the millions who have completed their sentences, but still live with employment restrictions, poverty and shame.

How many is enough?

With 5% of the world's population, the US houses 25% of the world's prisoners. But it makes no sense. Where incarceration rates have gone up, crime rates have not gone down. Where crime has gone down, so have incarceration rates.

It costs as much to house a man in prison as it would cost to pay him a living wage, but by putting him behind bars, we lose his productivity and the tax base. Almost all women in prison are parents, most of very young children. When their grandmothers and friends cannot take them in, the children go into foster care. Our taxes pay for that, too. We are raising an entire generation of youth at extreme risk for incarceration. The losses are immense, at every level. The system is broken, and it is destroying the quality of our lives.

I work with a woman who just spent four years in prison. She was a mail carrier and a mom. Five years ago, after a fight, her husband threw her out of the house. She had two beers with a friend and got in the car to find a place to stay. She had a wreck and hurt someone. When she went to prison, her sons lost their mother. The older one coped, but the younger one was left on a gravel road at 16 with a blanket and a backpack and nowhere to go, and has been homeless ever since. When he talks to her about it now, he cries. And she cries, because she wants to take care of him. She is resourceful, and she got a job. She travels three hours a day by bus to get there, where she works half a day for \$7.50 an hour. The buspass costs \$85 a month. She stays with a friend, who wants rent. She says, "Deep down inside, I want to die. But I also want to live. I will help my sons to heal. That is my reason to live."

Prisons are for serious and violent offenders, who should be held in secure facilities and monitored when they leave. But parole officers are being laid off, and those who remain are inundated with people convicted of minor crimes. This puts all of us at risk, and does not solve the problem.

There are alternatives to prison -- alternatives that would hold people accountable but keep them working and their families intact. Alternatives that would treat mental illness and substance abuse. Alternatives that would address the underlying issues and restore balance.

Our prison system is broken. That is why Senator Jim Webb (D-VA) and 22 cosponsors reintroduced S306, the National Criminal Justice Commission Act, to conduct a thorough and scientific review of our justice system and how it can be repaired.

Enough. It is time for justice to be restored.

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