

Police recommendations to reduce incarceration

Can our country roll back sentences and release prisoners without sacrificing decades of hard-won reductions in crime? Many are skeptical. They fear we are on the brink of a spike in violent crime, already reported in some cities this year.

Yet politicians from both sides of the aisle are calling for a reduction in imprisonment. And bills in Congress, such as the Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act, are gaining traction. Is this the right thing to do?

Police recommendations to cut incarceration & crime / G. McCarthy & R. Serpas
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[Garry McCarthy - police superintendent, Chicago. Ronal Serpas - former police superintendent of New Orleans, /Co-chairs: Law Enforcement Leaders to Reduce Crime & Incarceration.]



As police chiefs who together have 70 years of experience managing crime, we firmly believe that we can reduce incarceration and crime together. We know firsthand that more incarceration does not keep our country safe. Our experience and research show that good crime control policy is not about locking up everyone. It's about locking up the right people.

For this reason, we are joining with more than 130 fellow law enforcement leaders from the 50 states — police, prosecutors, sheriffs, attorneys general — to launch a new group called Law Enforcement Leaders to Reduce Crime and Incarceration. Our mission is to urge this shift across the country. And there are solutions to guide us.

We are proud of law enforcement's role in bringing crime down to historic lows. Even so, our methods have delivered a sobering new reality: Our criminal justice system has grown into a massive enterprise. The U.S. has just under 5% of the world's population yet nearly 25% of its prisoners — at a cost to taxpayers of \$80 billion per year and especially felt by communities of color. Our nation's rates of incarceration — the highest in the world — fail to make us safer.

Prison often turns first-time offenders into repeat criminals and, thus, can actually harm public safety. Research suggests smart policing, treatment, alternatives to prison and educational programs work to bring down crime.

How does the country embark on reducing incarceration and crime? We can start by changing practices in our own offices. But as police and prosecutors, we are obligated to enforce the law. To achieve true change, we need to reform laws that over-criminalize and over-punish. Our group has homed in on four policies that can bring transformative change. We will be meeting with President Obama this week to urge him to support these reforms:

- First, we ask our police and prosecutors to develop **alternatives to arrest and prosecution**. The autopilot cycle of arrest, incarceration and prison is not the most effective means of crime control. We need to ensure that people suffering from mental illness and drug addiction are diverted to treatment instead of arrested and jailed.
- Second, we urge **legislatures to cut the number of crimes on the books**. Low-level crimes, such as possession of small amounts of marijuana or shoplifting, are felonies in many states. These should be misdemeanors. When an offense is classified as a felony, it entails more prison time and makes it more difficult to transition back into society. Pursuing prison time for petty offenses means officers and prosecutors spend less time responding to violence and murders.
- Third, we urge Washington and state legislatures to **reduce, or in some cases eliminate, overly punitive mandatory minimum sentencing laws**, especially for drug and non-violent crimes. Research shows that arbitrarily increasing time served does not help keep the public safe.
- Finally, we seek to **strengthen ties between law enforcement agencies and the communities** we serve. Collaboration with neighborhood residents builds trust, which prevents crime instead of increasing unnecessary arrests. At a time of tension between law enforcement and many communities, this commitment can help address longstanding issues of racial inequity and is integral to a smarter approach for crime fighting and public order.

Of course, we need dangerous and violent offenders off our streets. But we should stop using incarceration as our default response. Our utmost goal is the safety of this nation. We need less incarceration, not more, to help us do our jobs and keep all Americans safe.