



Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act of 2017 (S.1917)

Background:

Unnecessarily long prison sentences, combined with the lack of rehabilitative programs for people in prison, exacerbate hunger, poverty, and existing inequalities.

Overly harsh mandatory minimum prison sentences have contributed to the rapid increase of our country's prison population. The federal prison population has increased more than 750 percent over the past 35 years. Moreover, Hispanic (38.3 percent) and African-American (31.5 percent) defendants are disproportionately convicted of offenses that carry a federal mandatory minimum penalty (compared to 27.4 overall).

While serving time in prison, people lose income and work skills and often lack opportunities to participate in rehabilitative programs. This makes it harder to find a job after leaving prison. Children of incarcerated parents are more likely to fall into poverty, which often results in lower academic achievement and higher risk of depression, withdrawal, and behavioral issues.

Bill Analysis:

The Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act (SRCA) is a bipartisan bill that would reform some U.S. sentencing laws and better prepare incarcerated persons to reenter the workforce and the community. The bill:

1. **Reduces some mandatory minimum sentences for non-violent drug offenses and expands the existing safety valve.** While the bill reduces *minimum* sentences, it does not eliminate these sentences or decrease *maximum* penalties. It also expands the existing safety valve, a mechanism that gives judges greater ability to issue sentences that better fit the crime. Currently the safety valve applies only to a very narrow set of offenses, and



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even very minor prior offenses make a person ineligible for it. The reduced minimum sentences and expanded safety valve apply only to minor offenses such as transporting or storing drugs or money; they do not apply to serious or violent offenders.

2. **Makes the Fair Sentencing Act of 2010 retroactive.** The Fair Sentencing Act reduced the unfairly disproportionate gap between crack and powder cocaine sentences from 100:1 to 18:1. However, that law was not retroactive. Currently, more than 8,000 people (87.7 percent of whom are African-American) are serving lengthy sentences for pre-2010 crack cocaine convictions. This bill would allow those serving pre-2010 crack cocaine sentences to apply for an amended sentence and be treated equal to individuals convicted today. Sentence reductions would not be automatic and would be reviewed by courts on a case-by-case basis.
3. **Improve rehabilitative programs in prisons and increase their availability.** An eligible person can receive "time credits" for completing rehabilitative programs

WHAT IS A MANDATORY MINIMUM?

A law requiring any person who commits a given crime to be sentenced to an automatic minimum number of years in prison without exception, regardless of the circumstances of the crime or the length of other sentences received. These laws are set by Congress, not by judges.

such as work or job training, education programs, drug rehabilitation, and faith-based programs. Earned credits can be applied toward spending the end of a prison sentence under alternative supervision such as home confinement or a halfway house. Time credits do not reduce the length of sentences and cannot be earned by high-risk prisoners. People who cannot earn time credits can earn other rewards such as increased phone call minutes or family visiting time.

Today, we are called to work to end the brokenness of hunger and poverty in our communities. Those involved in the justice system deserve our respect (Romans 13:1-5). But those authorities are also part of God’s work of care and compassion. Thus, attention should be given to the healing and restoration of people who have been broken by crime and the criminal justice system.

A Biblical Reflection:

The creation stories in Genesis 1 and 5 affirm that God created women and men in God’s likeness. In Luke 10:27, Jesus says, “You shall love the Lord your God...and your neighbor as yourself.” Together, these texts affirm the inestimable worth of humans and call us to share God’s love with one another—even when the likeness of God is marred in a person’s life and distracts others from seeing the image of the divine. Earlier in Luke (4:18), Jesus announces that the release of the captives is a sign of God’s kingdom. Isaiah 60 and 61 present a vision of rebuilding, restoring, and renewing all that is broken in society.

Why Reforming our Criminal Justice System is Urgent:

Current policies are fueling a system of mass incarceration with enormous human and financial costs that the U.S. cannot sustain. The Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act takes an important step toward ensuring our prison system offers people a chance at redemption and that helps rather than harms the future of individuals, families, and communities. This bill would help people spend more time in the workforce and with their families and community’s support systems and less time sitting in jail or struggling to adjust once they are released. When formerly incarcerated people are reunited with their families and have better jobs and higher wages, their families are less likely to face hunger and poverty.

Take Action: Help break the cycle of mass incarceration and hunger. Call or email your senators (800/826-3688) and ask them to cosponsor and pass S.1917, the Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act of 2017.

MASS INCARCERATION AND HUNGER: ONE CONTRIBUTES TO THE OTHER

HELP END BOTH

MASS INCARCERATION

HUNGER

Factors contributing to the cycle:

- Racial bias
- Broken criminal justice system
- Unemployment
- Below-average wages
- Lower levels of education
- War on drugs
- Poverty
- Bans on receiving some types of gov't assistance

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