



March 27, 2014

United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator:

On behalf of the Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and Catholic Charities USA, we write to ask you to support the *Smarter Sentencing Act* (S. 1410). The bill is a modest first step in reforming our nation's broken sentencing policies. There are many laudatory provisions in the bill, but the Committee's addition of three new categories of mandatory minimums in the amended bill is counterproductive. We continue to urge that one-size-fits-all sentencing policies, such as mandatory minimums, are inadequate in addressing the complexities of crime and community safety.

The *Smarter Sentencing Act* proposes important reforms to mandatory minimum sentences by expanding current judicial sentencing options related specifically to non-violent drug offenses. The bill also permits reductions in mandatory minimum sentences for certain drug crimes and allows crack cocaine offenders to seek lighter sentences under the *2010 Fair Sentencing Act*.

Our Catholic tradition supports the community's right to establish and enforce laws that protect people and advance the common good. But our faith teaches us that both victims and offenders have a God-given dignity that calls for justice and restoration, not vengeance. The bishops of the United States, in their 2000 pastoral statement, *Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice*, stated, "Just as God never abandons us, so too we must be in covenant with one another. We are all sinners, and our response to sin and failure should not be abandonment and despair, but rather justice, contrition, reparation, and return or re-integration of all into the community."

The U.S. criminal justice system is the largest in the world and imprisons more people than that of any other nation. Although national incarceration rates have dropped the last three consecutive years, the overall incarceration rate has increased 500 percent during the past thirty years. As of 2011, approximately 7 million people were under some form of correctional control in the United States with close to 2.2 million people incarcerated in federal, state, or local prisons and jails.

Rigid sentencing policies for non-violent offenses are costly, ineffective and can be detrimental to the good of persons, families, and communities. Prolonged incarceration often contributes to family instability and poverty. Those who finally leave incarceration face significant challenges upon reentering society, such as finding housing and stable employment, high rates of substance abuse, and physical and mental health challenges.

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Incarceration costs have quadrupled in the past two decades with our nation spending an average of \$29,000 annually per prisoner to house them. Statistics for 2010 also indicate that annual incarceration costs for both state and federal governments were approximately \$80 billion. It is simply too costly in lives affected and in financial terms to continue to incarcerate people at this level. We continue to urge that instead of directing a vast amount of public resources to imprison more people and build more prisons and jails, the government should support effective programs aimed at crime prevention, rehabilitation, education efforts, substance abuse treatment, as well as programs of probation, parole and reintegration.

Though imperfect, the *Smarter Sentencing Act* will help begin a long, overdue reform of our nation's ineffective and costly sentencing practices. Pope Francis recently said, "God is in everyone's life. Even if the life of a person has been a disaster, even if it is destroyed by vices, drugs or anything else—God is in this person's life." We join the pope by advocating for reforms to our nation's sentencing policies that will lead to healing and restoration, rather than simply punishment.

Faithfully Yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Thomas Wenski". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal line extending to the left.

Most Reverend Thomas G. Wenski
Archbishop of Miami
Chairman, Committee on Domestic Justice
and Human Development

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rev. Larry Snyder". The signature is written in a cursive style.

Rev. Larry Snyder
President,
Catholic Charities USA