

Testimony Submitted for the Record

On behalf of the

*United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’
Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development,*

Catholic Charities USA,

and

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul

before the

House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform

“Criminal Justice Reform”

July 14, 2015

Introduction

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' (USCCB) Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development, Catholic Charities USA (CCUSA), and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul (SSVDP) are grateful for the opportunity to provide this testimony for the hearing, *Criminal Justice Reform*, with the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform.

The Catholic community brings both moral principles drawn from our faith tradition, and experience deeply rooted in communities throughout the country, in service to the common good. By our own efforts and our advocacy we promote justice, healing and restoration always focusing on the life and dignity of all persons.

Our Catholic tradition supports the community's right to establish and enforce laws that protect people and advance the common good. But our faith also 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."

Pope Francis has 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." Pope Francis has called for a Jubilee Year of Mercy beginning in December. In response Christians will pray, reflect and make greater efforts to be witnesses of God's mercy especially where brokenness and harm have affected people's lives.

We join the Holy Father by calling on Congress to pass effective and reasonable legislation to reform our nation's sentencing and criminal justice policies. Doing so will help foster healing, mercy and restoration, rather than simply punishment.

Time for Criminal Justice Reform

Congress has before it a great opportunity to pass substantive legislation to begin reform of our nation's broken criminal justice system. There is both bi-partisan support and agreement among a diverse body of advocates spanning the philosophical spectrum. In September as part of his trip to the United States, Pope Francis will visit a prison outside Philadelphia reflecting his consistent support for prisoners and for justice and mercy. What would be a better message from our government than to show the Holy Father our own commitment to these principles as reflected in our criminal justice system?

The United States imprisons more people than any other nation. 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. Although national incarceration rates have dropped in recent years, the federal incarceration rate has increased 500 percent during the past thirty years with close to half of those serving sentences for drug offenses.

Incarceration costs have quadrupled in the past two decades with our nation spending an average of \$29,000 annually per prisoner to house each. Statistics for 2010 indicate that annual incarceration costs for both state and federal governments were approximately \$80 billion with more than an 1100 percent increase in federal incarceration costs alone. Rigid sentencing policies for non-violent offenses have proven to be costly, ineffective and often detrimental to the good of persons, families and communities. Prolonged incarceration 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.

One-size-fits-all sentencing policies, such as mandatory minimums, are inadequate in addressing the complexities of crime and community safety. Instead of directing a vast amount of public resources to imprison more people and build more prisons and jails, government should support effective programs aimed at crime prevention, rehabilitation, education efforts, substance abuse treatment, as well as programs of probation, parole and reintegration.

More than 650,000 men, women and juveniles reenter society each year from federal and state prisons, local jails and detention centers. They face a myriad of challenges such as homelessness, obtaining the skills necessary to find gainful employment, and substance abuse and mental health challenges. Simply incarcerating people for unnecessarily lengthy sentences does not keep communities safe, increase the likelihood of true rehabilitation, nor meet our obligations to help restore our brothers and sisters to their communities.

It is simply too costly financially and in terms of lives negatively affected to continue to incarcerate people at this level. As Congress considers advancing legislation to address sentencing and other types of criminal justice reform, we offer these principles and priorities for consideration:

Sentencing Reform:

- Restore sentencing proportionality. Too often people are serving excessively long sentences even for non-violent offenses. Expand current judicial sentencing options related specifically to non-violent drug offenses;
- Permit reductions in mandatory minimum sentences for non-violent drug offences and permit crack cocaine offenders to seek retroactively lighter sentences under the *2010 Fair Sentencing Act*;
- Expand earned time credits for good behavior: Prisoners who have committed non-violent offenses should be able to reduce the length of their sentences by successfully participating in recidivism reduction and reentry programs.

Countering Recidivism

- Promote and support recidivism reduction and reentry programs including: occupational and vocational training, mental health and substance abuse treatment, assistance to find housing and employment, mentoring and life skills

- coaching, and domestic violence deterrence classes;
- Remove barriers that prevent access to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Federal Student Aid for formerly-incarcerated individuals so they are able to meet their basic needs and further their education;
- Promote partnerships with faith-based and community and non-profit organizations to provide recidivism reduction programs and services;

As recent data clearly illustrates, our nation's level of incarceration is simply too costly. Congress should support policies that call for cost savings resulting from reform legislation to be reinvested in programs and services that promote crime prevention, recidivism reduction programs, promote prison safety and reduce prison overcrowding.

Promoting Justice and Restoration: The Catholic Experience

Catholic institutions and organizations including Catholic Charities and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, driven by our faith, continue to find means to serve as many persons and families as we can with our donated private resources.

Many Catholic Charities agencies run prison ministry programs in their dioceses. Dedicated clergy, religious and lay volunteers visit these detention facilities regularly to provide access to the Mass, spiritual counseling, sacramental preparation, religious education, pastoral counseling, and reading and prayer materials to Catholic inmates and others. These ministries help inmates feel connected to their faith and the Church, a meaningful service when they feel forgotten and cut off from their families and communities. Some ministries reach out to the families of inmates as well as crime victims to provide support and foster reconciliation.

As one of the nation's largest social service providers, Catholic Charities agencies see the many struggles that the formerly incarcerated face once they leave prison with only the clothes on their backs, no place to live, and very little money or possibly none at all. In response, Catholic Charities agencies provide a diverse array of services: 42 agencies nationwide provided temporary or transitional shelter to the formerly incarcerated and 44 agencies provide other programs specifically targeting current and former prisoners, reaching more than 40,000 people in 2014. Services to this population include residential services for adults as well as delinquent youth, mentorship programs, housing, education and training, counseling services, and victims' assistance.

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul (The Society) serves over 2 million people and families in need, with support primarily offered by volunteers and donations. In efforts to move people from poverty to sustainability and prosperity, The Society constantly encounters barriers that keep formerly incarcerated people from attaining success. In Los Angeles, a half-way house works with people who have been incarcerated for 20 years or more. In Orlando, volunteers offer housing, career planning and other support groups to returning citizens. The Society has also launched a five-city pilot project that is investing in the leadership of formerly incarcerated men and women. The goal is to develop community leaders who will help formerly incarcerated persons on their road to self-sufficiency. This project, coupled with The Society's model of visiting people in need in their homes, develops personal linkages with, and forms the catalyst for, job training and

counseling, employment, emotional guidance, family re-integration, and short-term financial support for housing, clothing and transportation. Importantly, ex-offenders themselves are coordinating the work in each of the five geographies to ensure that it is not “pie-in-the-sky” activity and theory, but truly meaningful for the returning citizens and their families.

Conclusion

The Catholic community brings a unique perspective to criminal justice policy reflected in our advocacy, service and ministry. Our work is deeply rooted in our Catholic social teaching tradition—a tradition which is nurtured by mercy and forgiveness. That mercy and forgiveness upholds the life and dignity of all people, even for those who have sinned against their sisters and brothers. Our witness and active presence in the life of communities includes many visits to prisons throughout this country and time spent with formerly incarcerated persons.

However, the faith community alone cannot reach the enormous numbers of people leaving our prisons today. Our broken criminal justice system is breaking up families and communities. The time for serious reform is now. We call on Congress to act and support smart and effective sentencing and criminal justice reform legislation that protects human life and dignity, ensures safe and peaceful communities, and promotes the common good.