



April 14, 2015

The Honorable Charles E. Grassley  
Chairman  
Committee on the Judiciary  
224 Dirksen Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Patrick J. Leahy  
Ranking Member  
Committee on the Judiciary  
224 Dirksen Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Grassley and Ranking Member Leahy:

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 of 2015* (S. 502/H.R. 920). The bill is a modest first step in reforming our nation's broken sentencing policies.

There are many laudatory provisions in the *Smarter Sentencing Act* that would implement important reforms to mandatory minimum sentences. These include:

- Expanding current judicial sentencing options related specifically to non-violent drug offenses;
- Permitting reductions in mandatory minimum sentences for certain drug crimes and allows crack cocaine offenders to seek lighter sentences under the *2010 Fair Sentencing Act*;
- Calling for a review of how cost savings resulting from the legislation could be used to promote crime prevention, recidivism reduction programs and reduce prison overcrowding.

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."

The U.S. criminal justice system is the largest in the world and imprisons more people than that of 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.

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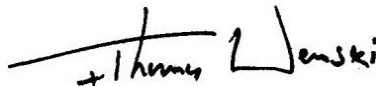
Incarceration costs have quadrupled in the past two decades with our nation spending an average of \$29,000 annually per prisoner to house them. Statistics for 2010 indicate that annual incarceration costs for both state and federal governments were approximately \$80 billion with more than an 1100 percent increase in federal incarceration costs alone. It is simply too costly financially and in terms of lives negatively affected to continue to incarcerate people at this level.

Rigid sentencing policies for non-violent offenses are costly, ineffective and can be 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.

The *Smarter Sentencing Act* will help begin a long, overdue reform of our nation's ineffective and costly sentencing practices. 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." We join the Holy Father 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 large, sweeping initial "T".

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

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Donna J. Markham OP, PhD". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial "D".

Sr. Donna Markham, OP  
President-Elect,  
Catholic Charities USA