



ERLC Supports Criminal Justice Reform

The United States is home to less than 5% of the world's population, and yet almost 25% of the world's prison population. A faulty assumption is at work in our criminal justice system: higher incarceration rates and longer sentences will automatically lead to safer communities and lower recidivism rates. Unfortunately, this conclusion has not proved true.

The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) upholds the belief that all men and women are created with dignity, and have the right to fair and just treatment under the law. The statistics on incarceration do not simply represent data, but people. These are our neighbors who bear God's image—sons, daughters, and, more often than we realize, mothers and fathers. A balance needs to be struck between upholding the law for community safety and dealing holistically with how we punish and rehabilitate individuals who break those laws. Moreover, faith communities play a needful role in having a transformative effect on the life in question.

The cost of incarceration absorbs a significant percentage of taxpayer dollars at the federal, state, and local levels. Overcriminalization and poorly managed parole and reentry programs creating a crisis that negatively affects more than 65 million Americans with criminal records. It also consumes more than 80 billion dollars from state and federal agencies annually. These numbers are alarming and suggest our current system is broken. Public revenues saved by a reformed criminal justice system could be applied to improve and expand parole, probation, and reintegration programs.

Government should commit to implementing a criminal justice system that supports the flourishing of communities and families. The ERLC is committed to advocating for thoughtful changes that strengthen families and reconcile offenders to their communities. We support legislative policies that seek to reduce high incarceration rates without jeopardizing public safety. We affirm that probation and parole may serve as a wise, just, and effective alternative to prolonged incarceration for certain nonviolent offenders. We urge churches and other ministries to participate in programs that assist prisoners with reintegration into society, including transitional housing, vocational and drug rehabilitation, and family support. We want to see lives not only reconciled to society but ultimately reconciled to Christ. A criminal justice system that deals justly with offenders serves that end.

As Christians, we recognize the value of second chances and restoration to community. We support prison chaplains, local churches, seminary educational initiatives, and other ministries that serve in prisons and youth detention centers. Furthermore, we support programs that seek to reintegrate prisoners into their communities to reduce recidivism through moral and spiritual transformation. Southern Baptists are committed to leading the way in forming and maintaining healthy communities and families who welcome the trapped, broken, and afflicted to new beginnings and more productive futures.
