

Criminal Justice Reform

Police brutality, mass incarceration, for-profit prisons, gaping racial disparities and zero tolerance laws have devastated Ohio's low-income and minority communities, stripping economic opportunity from generations of Ohioans.

We must transform our justice system from one based in criminalization and incarceration – particularly of young people and people of color – to one based in sound and humane policies that support healing and growth for individuals, families, and communities. We must reduce the number and racial disparity of incarcerated Ohioans. And we must reinvest in communities that have been decimated by the impacts of over incarceration so there is hope for a future that respects and values all Ohioans.

Nearly two million Ohioans have a criminal record; for many returning citizens, the most basic functions of everyday life are complicated by that conviction.

This requires a broad spectrum of legal and policy changes, including the decriminalization of school disciplinary procedures, the reform of policing and sentencing practices, and the removal of barriers to successful reentry.

We must pass local and statewide reforms, to ensure that the system does not simply shift incarcerated individuals from one venue to another. We believe that reducing Ohio's incarceration rates will have numerous ancillary effects in low-income and minority communities, making our criminal justice system more fair, effective and safe for all.

How to Talk About Criminal Justice Reform

Lead with Values

We lock up too many individuals — especially people of color — for too long, without a clear public safety rationale, leaving too many families and communities without vital economic support. Too often, this starts in childhood when kids fall victim to zero tolerance policies and end up trapped in the school-to-prison pipeline.

Emphasize the Ends

Communities will be safer – and more families will be whole – when we create a criminal justice system that reduces the number of people we put behind bars, increases the treatment of mental illness and addiction, and invests in the people and places that have been chronically stripped of jobs and opportunities. And when we break the school-to-prison pipeline, more kids will have the opportunity to learn, graduate, and get good jobs so they can provide for themselves, their families, and their communities.

Focus on Lived Experience

When a 12-year-old black boy is shot and killed by a white police officer who is then allowed to go free, the scales of justice are far out of balance. When families are separated because overly-harsh laws put too many people behind bars for too long, our communities and our children pay the price. When people complete their sentence and then struggle to find a job to get back on their feet, we make it entirely too hard for them to restart their lives in a positive direction. When kids are thrown out of school for bringing a plastic knife on the playground or starting a food fight, we are placing them on a path that leads straight to the criminal justice system.

Name the Causes

Politicians who supported the War on Drugs essentially waged a war on communities of color, and the results have been tragic. The decision of these policymakers to lock up so many people has led to an unprecedented rate of imprisonment that deprives people of their freedom and tears them apart from their families. Zero tolerance policies have decimated kids' – primarily black kids' – hopes for a bright future.

As our communities suffer from the effects of mass incarceration, private prison companies rake in enormous profits, benefiting from keeping Ohioans caged behind bars for as long as possible.

Link the Problem to the Solution

If we want to reinvest in the people and communities that have been deeply damaged by the discriminatory policies that started as part of the War on Drugs, we must fix our bloated prison system and issue sentences that actually fit the crimes. And we must end zero tolerance policies in schools and have smarter school discipline policies in place that keep children focused on learning and the future.