

Support Bipartisan Sentencing Reform

The Jewish Council for Public Affairs (JCPA) urges Congress to support robust sentencing reform that reduces disproportionate mandatory minimums, grants judges greater discretion, and enables people to petition for sentencing reductions. As long as we continue to feed broad swaths of the public into our prison system, any bill without sentencing reform is simply a Band-Aid.

Beginning in the 1970s, the “War on Drugs” produced harsh mandatory minimum sentences that lengthened prison terms across the board. As a result, our prison population exploded. Today we incarcerate roughly 25% of the world’s prison population. Despite similar usage rates, black people are 10 times as likely to be arrested for drug offenses, and similarly more likely to be sentenced to longer terms than white defendants.

- **We strongly urge Congress to move forward with reform measures that reduce mandatory minimums, which are the single largest factor in the growth of our prison population.** JCPA is deeply concerned that the current iteration of the FIRST STEP Act, the subject of ongoing negotiations, lacks sentencing reform, relies on discriminatory “risk assessment” tools that will exacerbate racial disparities, and further criminalizes immigration violations.
- **We urge Members to support merging the FIRST STEP Act with the Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act (S. 1917), a bill that JCPA has long supported.** Although we are concerned about the establishment of new mandatory minimums, use of “risk assessment” tools, and lack of alternatives to incarceration, we believe the Sentencing Reform bill would be a pivotal step in ending mass incarceration. While JCPA opposes “risk assessment” tools, we believe that Congress can mitigate damage by ensuring that such systems account for people’s needs, as well as their risks.
- **While prison reform is certainly necessary, it alone cannot make the system more just.** Long sentences and mandatory incarceration for minor drug offenses, which make up about half of all arrests, have not deterred drug use or reduced addiction rates.
- **Mandatory minimum sentences for low-level drug offenses that are deemed disproportionately lengthy should apply retroactively.** People unjustly languishing in jail based on the prior mandatory minimum requirements should have the opportunity to challenge their imprisonment under the new laws.
- **JCPA also urges Congress to reauthorize the Second Chance Act.** This bill would help remove barriers to reentry and invest in job training and educational programs that increase employment and reduce recidivism.

For more information, please contact Tammy Gilden, Senior Policy Associate at the Jewish Council for Public affairs, at tgilden@thejcpa.org.

The Jewish Council for Public Affairs (JCPA) is the hub of the Jewish community relations network, representing over 125 local Jewish community relations councils and 16 national Jewish agencies. Together our network builds consensus on behalf of the entire Jewish community to promote a just and pluralistic American society, advocate for human rights around the world, and support Israel's quest for peace and security.