

A Federal Agenda to Promote Safety and Justice

The president and Congress can take targeted measures to prevent crime, reduce incarceration and recidivism, and save money.



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All Americans deserve to live in safe communities. The criminal justice system can achieve this while upholding fair and humane policies. After the 2020 election, the Brennan Center for Justice released an affirmative, bipartisan agenda to advance these ends. ^[1] And over the past four years, officials have pursued many of its proposals, like promoting evidence-based and accountable policing, funding community-led public safety strategies, and passing legislation to improve oversight of federal jails and prisons.

But there is more work to do. The United States still leads the world in incarceration, and its criminal justice system is expensive and inefficient: Nearly 40 percent of people confined to prison are incarcerated without any compelling public safety justification. ^[2] The more than 400,000 people who annually exit prison are often stymied by their criminal convictions from rejoining their communities and leading productive lives. ^[3] And states and localities are still figuring out how to break cycles of crime and ensure durable public safety; since the pandemic, law enforce-

ment agencies nationwide have been solving fewer crimes. ^[4]

This agenda presents crucial, targeted measures the Trump administration and Congress should champion over the next four years to prevent crime, reduce incarceration, improve oversight, save taxpayer dollars, and promote the successful reentry of formerly incarcerated people. The recommendations include ways to improve the federal criminal justice system, where the president and Congress can exert the most direct influence, as well as funding measures to shape policies at the local, state, tribal, and territorial levels. Some proposals require legislation, while others can be achieved through executive

action. Many have been implemented on a small scale in recent years, yielding promising results that merit expansion.

During his first term, President Trump signed the groundbreaking First Step Act of 2018, which comprised a spate of criminal justice reforms. Among other things, it addressed unfair sentences and offered second chances to people in prison. Now the president and Congress can build on that legacy and make the criminal justice system work better for all.

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Endnotes

1 Ram Subramanian et al., *A Federal Agenda for Criminal Justice Reform*, Brennan Center for Justice, December 9, 2020, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/policy-solutions/federal-agenda-criminal-justice-reform>.

2 James Austin et al., *How Many Americans Are Unnecessarily Incarcerated?*, Brennan Center for Justice, December 9, 2016, 7, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/how-many-americans-are-unnecessarily-incarcerated>.

3 E. Ann Carson and Rich Kluckow, “Prisoners in 2022 — Statistical Tables,” Bureau of Justice Statistics, revised October 15, 2024, 19, <https://bjs.ojp.gov/document/p22st.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/8KSX-5HXM>]; and Brian Elderbroom et al., *Every Second: The Impact of the Incarceration Crisis on America’s Families*, FWD.us, December 2018, <https://everysecond.fwd.us/downloads/everysecond.fwd.us.pdf>.

4 John Gramlich, “What the Data Says About Crime in the U.S.,” Pew Research Center, April 24, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/04/24/what-the-data-says-about-crime-in-the-us/>; and Jeff

Asher, "Police Departments Nationwide Are Struggling to Solve Crimes," *New York Times*, December 5, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/05/opinion/police-crime-data.html>.

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