

**UNDER EMBARGO UNTIL**

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New Report: America needs to reconsider its approach to violent crime to reduce incarceration

*The US can safely reduce its prison population by having an informed conversation about violent crime*

Washington, DC – As the nation struggles with how to address one of the greatest public policy issues in its history, a new report, released today by the [Justice Policy Institute](#) (JPI), takes a new look at the issue of mass incarceration and how America responds to violent crime. The report, *Defining Violence: Reducing Incarceration by Rethinking America's Approach to Violence*, notes that while there is currently more support than ever for criminal justice reform and efforts to reduce the imprisonment of more than 2 million people across the country, the U.S. will not be able to lower its incarceration rate significantly without changing how the justice system treats violent crimes.

The conversations on the federal and state levels, as well as recent policy reforms, have focused on reducing the incarceration of people convicted of nonviolent offenses. Yet just under half the people in prison have been convicted of a violent crime, and meaningful justice reform must include rethinking how laws, policies, and practices treat these offenses if the nation is to see sustained reductions in incarceration.

“This is a complicated political and systems reform issues, which many policymakers haven’t even yet begun to grapple with,” said Marc Schindler, Executive Director of the Justice Policy Institute. “There’s no question that we can safely and meaningfully reduce our prison and jail populations, but to do so we need to have the courage to come up with a more effective approach to violence prevention, and address how the justice system treats violent offenses.”

Coming at a time when there has been very little change in national prison and jail populations, the report points to bright spots that show growing public appetite for a different approach to violent crime.

Many of the laws enacted that have led to high incarceration rates followed spikes in crime. But just recently when D.C. communities were responding to growing concerns around crime, D.C. Councilmember Kenyan McDuffie introduced and secured passage of the *Neighborhood Engagement Achieves Results Act of 2016*, which adopts a public health approach to crime prevention, and does not increase justice system involvement. The bill passed the D.C. Council unanimously. Washington, D.C. also changed its Assault on a Police Officer law this year.

"Public officials must have the courage to pursue policies that have been demonstrated to improve public safety. Unfortunately, too often when our communities are faced with crime, we resort to the failed policies of the past instead of examining and addressing the underlying causes of criminal behavior," said Ward 5 D.C. Councilmember Kenyan McDuffie-D.

*Defining Violence* surveys the current debate in state legislatures and Congress on criminal justice reform, noting where justice reform proposals have been mired down in debates over what constitutes a violent crime, how justice systems treat violent crimes, and how these debates have made it challenging to making lasting justice reform possible. *Defining Violence* also connects the debate going on in legislatures to the way offenses are defined by statute, how the system treats behavior is divorced from larger social policy discussions (for example, the wide availability of weapons), and the disconnection between the evidence on what works and policy in sentencing, corrections, and criminal justice.

Along with an increasing reliance on public health approaches to violence prevention, there are other bright spots around efforts to reduce the incarceration of people convicted of violent crimes. These include, significant reductions in juvenile confinement for violent crimes, reforms spurred on by the Supreme Court around juvenile life without parole that are allowing people convicted of violent crimes long ago to finally have a chance to be released, broader reforms being offered to parole that make decisions less reliant on the offense, and law changes that are chipping away at long prison sentences for violent crimes.

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JPI is a national nonprofit organization dedicated to reducing the use of incarceration and the justice system by promoting fair and effective policies. The report *Defining Violence* and summaries of the major findings from the report will be available on [JPI's website](#) on August 23<sup>rd</sup>.