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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 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.”

Maryland legislators struggled this last session with justice reform proposals that excluded significant numbers of people from release because they were convicted of a violent offense. In the last legislative session, some legislatures conflated nonviolent drug offenses with violent crime in their debate over justice reform proposals.

But of the hundred people convicted of violent crimes released from prison due to a Maryland appellate ruling, *none have been convicted of a new felony offense.*

“If we are going to lower prison and jail populations in Maryland, we need to expand opportunities for parole and shorten sentences for more people incarcerated in this state,” said Senator Muse, District 26 (D). “As we have shown with the Unger releases, even people convicted of the most serious behavior can come home, without compromising public safety.”

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 make lasting justice reform possible. *Defining Violence* also connects the debate going on in legislatures to the way offenses are defined by statute, critiques how the system treats behavior is divorced from larger social policy discussions (for example, the wide availability of weapons), and examines 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 allow people convicted of violent crimes to come home, 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 23rd.