

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/president-obama-will-promote-opportunity-in-state-of-the-union-but-sentencing-laws-and-other-obstacles-block-the-way-for-many>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Tonight, President Obama will speak to the nation in his State of the Union address about opportunity, action and optimism. When thinking about opportunity, and the many factors that stymie it, it is long past time to address harsh sentencing laws and obstacles in the path of those leaving prisons and jails that disproportionately affect minority communities.

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, a double-edged sword that on one hand has helped reduce violence against women and strengthen community oriented policing, yet on the other, shut down pathways to opportunity by expanding incarceration through mandatory minimums and incentivizing prison building by the states.

It is also the 50th anniversary of the War on Poverty. Over-incarceration and its contribution to inequality has been an obstacle in that battle. It has left too many with unrealized potential to become productive members of society who help strengthen the fabric of their communities.

In the coming weeks, Vera will release a series of reports examining sentencing trends where the states stand on mandatory minimums and other sentencing practices and the resulting collateral consequences. We will also be publishing a comprehensive study of the impact of the 2009 reforms to the Rockefeller drug laws in New York State, examining whether they have improved offender outcomes, reduced racial disparities, and saved money.

Look also for updates from our Washington, DC, office about activities we are convening around the 20th anniversary of the 1994 Crime Bill where we have been, where we are now, and where we should go in the future.

Meantime, join the conversation on Twitter about the President's speech and the potential for sentencing reform at #crimebillat20.

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