

Restore Justice Foundation

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://restorejustice.org/issues-solutions/our-focus-areas/#release>

Policy Issue Resources

For decades, Illinois has pursued a tough-on-crime approach to crafting its criminal and corrections systems. These policies have funneled thousands of young people some no older than fourteen or fifteen at the time of their offense into prison for extreme lengths of time. Once imprisoned, they face inhumane conditions while being denied any meaningful avenue to rehabilitation or earned release.

We focus our advocacy on three areas of law and policy: sentencing reform, meaningful pathways to release, and the conditions of incarceration. These areas impact not just the individuals who serve Illinois most extreme sentences, but also their loved ones and communities.

Restore Justice is also an active member of Chicago's broader coalition of advocacy and reform-minded criminal justice organizations. As the only statewide group dedicated to advocating for the men and women dispensed the state's most extreme sentences, we lend our support to other progressive efforts and speak out to ensure that reforms proposed by other groups do not do so at the expense of those we serve.

In Illinois, a number of sentencing laws converge to create a system that consistently applies extremely long prison terms. These include mandatory minimums, firearm enhancements, and automatic transfer laws.

While touted as a strategy to make our justice system more fair and effective, research shows that policies like these lead to [little to no reduction](#) in crime, while the longer sentences they produce [contribute heavily to overcrowded prisons](#).

And when Illinois laws force judges to impose extreme sentences that don't reflect the individual circumstances of a case, no group is hurt more or has more to lose than the children and young people who find themselves ensnared in our criminal justice system.

Our Work in Sentencing Reform

Restore Justice supports policies that would eliminate or reduce mandatory minimums, roll back firearm enhancements, and otherwise change the laws that rigidly increase sentence lengths or restrict judges from applying appropriate sentences. When given the choice, our team has found that [many judges chose to depart from harsher sentences](#), making it all the more important to give judges more ability to dispense sentences based on individual consideration.

You can also learn more about how these sentencing laws work through our blog, with links below:

Many people who enter prison in Illinois have few meaningful ways to work towards their release.

In 1978, Illinois abolished the practice of parole. It remains in the minority of states today that made this choice.

Then, in 1998, the state passed truth-in-sentencing laws, which restrict the ability of many prisoners to earn time off their sentences. This often means individuals sentenced in 1998 serve double the time as someone sentenced for the same offense in 1997.

These policies lead to [longer and longer prison stays](#) yet show [little to no evidence](#) of reduced crime or improved public safety.

When done right, parole and other programs for early release save money and reduce future crime. Parole costs the taxpayer [ten times less](#) than putting a person behind bars for the same amount of time, while studies show that individuals released on discretionary parole are [up to 16%](#) less likely to be rearrested than those released through non-discretionary programs. The lack of parole is also especially damaging to the individuals who enter prison as children. In fact, Illinois continues to allow children to be sentenced to life without parole, a practice that goes against both the [U.S. Supreme Court](#) and [national trends](#).

In terms of truth-in-sentencing, longer sentences don't make the public any safer. For young and other low-risk offenders, enhanced prison time can actually [backfire](#), by separating people from their community and families and increasing the likelihood of future brushes with the law.

That's why bringing back parole and rolling back truth-in-sentencing laws are a smart step for tackling crime and mass incarceration in Illinois.

Our Work in Meaningful Pathways to Release

Restore Justice supports efforts to give rehabilitated people more avenues to earn their release. Currently, that means restoring Illinois to its pre-1978 parole-for-release system and rolling back truth-in-sentencing laws.

You can also learn more about parole through the primer linked below.

In recent years, the Illinois Department of Corrections has been sued across [multiple class action suits](#) on issues ranging from [inadequate medical care](#) to [physical and sexual abuse](#) at the hands of militarized tactical squads. These suits point to the degrading and potentially criminal conditions in correctional facilities, that may end up costing taxpayers [millions](#) in payouts and settlements.

Some believe harsh and degrading prison conditions help curb criminal behavior through deterrence and subjugation. But research shows harsh conditions [dont reduce recidivism](#), and can [actually have the opposite effect](#). And since most people who enter prison will one day be released, society is best served when time behind bars prepares these individuals to live responsibly once returned.

Investing in prison [programming shown to reduce recidivism](#) is one way to make prisons a pathway to rehabilitation, rather than an anchor that drags and keeps people down. Supporting [programs that divert at-risk youth](#) from criminal activity before they ever enter is another.

Whatever path is chosen, one thing is certain: the human, social, and economic costs of our current prison state are now intolerable, and change cant wait any longer.

Our Work in Conditions of Incarceration

Restore Justice supports efforts to move towards Illinois corrections towards a model that values rehabilitation over punishment. This includes making healthcare more affordable for inmates, allowing family and loved ones to visit them more often, and reducing the use of solitary confinement as a punitive measure.

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