

The Sentencing Project

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.sentencingproject.org/stories/christopher-poulos/>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

1705 DeSales St, NW
8th Floor
Washington, D.C. 20036
202.628.0871
(fax) 202.628.1091
staff@sentencingproject.org

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At age 24, I decided that I was ready for help. With great difficulty I achieved sobriety and left my former lifestyle behind. But several months later, I was charged in federal court with drug distribution and possession of a firearm for behavior that had occurred prior to my life course change.

After I was arrested, my court-appointed attorney told me I was in a lot of trouble. He immediately asked if I was ready to plead guilty and whether I wanted to cooperate with the prosecution.

Chris Poulos (L) with Glenn Martin, founder & president of Just Leadership USA

I didn't understand why we were discussing a guilty plea when we didn't even know the scope of the evidence the government had against me, or why we would not consider going to trial. When I asked about getting out of jail, the attorney said that I had very little chance of having bail set and didn't think it was even worth asking for a detention hearing. He told me I should resign myself to staying in jail, which would at least accrue time served. Based on the charges alone, he told me I was looking at about eight years in prison.

That was when I realized that my counsel was not representing my best interests. He had thrown in the towel before charges were even brought. I knew I needed to obtain new counsel if I was to have any shot at a fair trial.

I was fortunate in that assistance from family and friends allowed me to hire a private lawyer. Within a few hours of hiring new counsel, I was released from jail. My new attorney simply reached an agreement with the federal prosecutor for my release. There was no detention hearing or need to post bail. The entire landscape changed as soon as I could pay for skilled and aggressive counsel.

When I walked out of jail that day, I left behind scores of others who could not afford to hire a private lawyer. Most of them were indigent and lacked access to higher education. Many were men of color. This is the difference that money can make in the criminal justice process. My fate went from not having a detention hearing because it was hopeless, to not needing one because an agreement for my release was immediately reached.

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Over 700,000 individuals disproportionately people of color sit in jail every day, many of them because they cannot afford to pay bail. The consequences can be enormous. They may lose their jobs, their homes, and even their children. They may also lose hope and become more likely to agree to a guilty plea in order to speed up their release.

The ability to pay for private counsel dramatically changed the course of my life, in spite of the fact that I still spent almost three years in federal prison. I completed college after leaving prison, and today, I am a third-year law student working on criminal justice policy at the local and national level. I completed an internship at The Sentencing Project and chair a subcommittee for the Mayor of Portland, Maine, exploring ways to divert people struggling with poverty, addiction, and mental health issues away from the criminal justice system and toward services. I am also the President of the American Constitution Society at the University of Maine School of Law. I mention these facts to provide hope for people currently or formerly incarcerated as well as to the families, friends, and communities of those directly impacted by mass incarceration and addiction.

The moment that I was released from jail solely because of my financial resources, I knew that I wanted to practice law. The experience disturbed my strong belief in equality, and my passion for promoting equal access to justice for all and reforming the criminal justice system was born on that day.

Increase in number of women incarcerated in the U.S. since 1980

Sentencing Policy

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8th Floor
Washington, D.C. 20036
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(fax) 202.628.1091
staff@sentencingproject.org

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