

# Vera Institute of Justice

## Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

**<https://www.vera.org/blog/ag-holder-makes-news-at-vera-leadership-conference-event-on-bipartisan-criminal-justice-reform>**

## Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Bipartisan support for criminal justice reform was strong at a symposium co-sponsored by Vera and [The Leadership Conference Education Fund](#) called A Conversation on Criminal Justice: A Call to Action for the Nation. The event, held at Georgetown Law School in Washington, DC on Tuesday, February 11, featured U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder, members of Congress, and a panel of experts.

Now is the time to build a movement to end mass incarceration and build a more efficient, humane criminal justice system, said Wade Henderson, President and CEO of The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights and The Leadership Conference Education Fund, in introducing General Holder. In the news-making speech that followed, Mr. Holder called for reexamination of felony disenfranchisement policies that disproportionately affect minorities and contribute to recidivism.

He also spoke about the bipartisan support for criminal justice reform and his support for the Smarter Sentencing Act.

This bipartisanship was echoed in remarks from members of Congress from both sides of the aisle, as well as the panel representing a variety of perspectives. Also notable was widespread agreement about socioeconomic consequences of mass incarceration. Senator Mike Lee (R-UT), a lead sponsor of the Smarter Sentencing Act, noted that the criminal justice system is in need of reform because its successes have created new challenges resulting in frayed communities that lock the families of people who are incarcerated into a different kind of institution of poverty and isolation. Senator Rand Paul (R-KY) also said that we need to address the cycle of incarceration, poverty, and re-incarceration at the state and federal level. Saying that mandatory minimums are the tip of the iceberg, he shared stories of lengthy mandatory sentences for first-time low-level drug offenders and other nonviolent offenses. Noting that reform is truly a bipartisan issue, Senator Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI) said, "We cannot incarcerate our way to keeping the public safe." And Representative Bobby Scott (D-VA) said that evidence-based sentencing practices can help youth stay on track and reduce crime.

The members of a panel moderated by Christine Leonard, director of Veras Washington, DC office, represented a range of perspectives yet found common ground on many of the same issues. Panelists included Laura Murphy, director of the ACLU's Washington legislative office; Craig DeRoche, president of Justice Fellowship; Rabbi Aaron Lipskar, executive director of the Aleph Institute; and John Malcolm, director of the Heritage Foundations Edwin Meese III Center for Legal and Judicial Studies.

In delivering the events opening remarks, Vera President Nick Turner said, For far too long, our criminal justice system has resulted in egregious disparities for the very same people and communities that we will increasingly rely upon to fuel the nations prosperity and growth. Welcoming the consensus emerging to address these issues, he noted that we are at an auspicious moment. As we look back, 2014 marks the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the landmark 1994 crime bill. That comprehensive legislation contained many measures that changed the landscape and, in so many ways, impacted the framework for where we are today.

To mark this moment, Mr. Turner announced that Vera is embarking on a dialogue called the Crime Bill at 20 its legacy, the lessons learned, and how we can forge a path ahead. Vera also released [A Playbook for Change? States Reconsider Mandatory Sentences](#), the first in a series of reports on sentencing trends related to the anniversary. Visit the [Crime Bill at 20](#) page on Veras website for more, including video of Mr. Holders speech.

*Pictured from left is Hillary Shelton, NAACP; Craig DeRoche, Justice Fellowship; Nick Turner, Vera Institute of Justice; Laura Murphy, ACLU; Attorney General Eric Holder; William Treanor, Georgetown University Law Center; Wade Henderson, Leadership Conference for Civil Rights; John Malcolm, Heritage Foundation; and Rabbi Aaron Lipskar, Aleph Institute.*

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