

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.acluohio.org/en/news/real-criminal-justice-reform-starts-now>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

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In his August 12 speech to the American Bar Association, United States Attorney General Eric Holder [did not mince words](#) on the problem of mass incarceration, calling it both a **moral and economic failure**.

More importantly, he [proposed some important changes](#) to reduce the U.S. prison population, including the elimination of mandatory minimum sentences for low-level, non-violent drug offenses.

The ACLU of Ohio also suggested a number of these changes at the state level in our 2010 report [Reform Cannot Wait](#).

Holders proposals are monumental considering the U.S. currently houses the worlds [largest prison population](#), thanks in large part to mandatory minimum sentencing laws and the more problematic War on Drugs.

Under these policies, the U.S. prison population has exploded, rising over [700 percent](#) from 1970 to 2005. Today, [nearly a quarter of all prison inmates](#) are serving time for drug offenses, and roughly half the inmates in state prisons are **non-violent offenders**.

Eric Holder is not the first prominent leader to notice this problem. In Ohio, politicians [are learning](#) that although tough-on-crime rhetoric may have [helped them get elected](#), the resulting policies have [left their constituents hurting](#).

Whether its the state of Ohio or the federal government, the basic **economic failure** Holder discusses comes down to simple math. Forty years of locking up nonviolent drug offenders has become expensive, especially when adding in the harsh [collateral sanctions](#) that make it nearly impossible for those coming out of jail to earn a living or support their families.

It stands to reason that locking up fewer people and making it easier for those reentering society to get a job (and pay taxes) will save us all a lot of money. And saving money seems to be the one thing [everyone can get behind](#).

Its harder to talk about the basic **moral failure** of our current model, i.e. the blatant, shameful racial disparity that is [evident in our system](#) of crime and punishment. Its this failure that makes African Americans in our country over [five times more likely](#) to be sent to prison than their white counterparts and [10 times](#) more likely to be sent to prison for a non-violent drug offense.

These numbers illustrate more than failed economic policy; they are an affront to our most fundamental principles of equality under the law.

But it doesnt have to be this way.

Our current situation is not inexplicable, nor is it irreversible. Everyday it becomes more and more obvious that we have created these problems through decades of counterproductive policy decisions.

Maybe its finally time to try a different approach.

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