

# Vera Institute of Justice

## Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

**<https://www.vera.org/blog/senator-booker-and-justice-experts-discuss-the-path-to-reform-at-vera-event>**

### Public Facing Advocacy Writing

For the past six months, we've used an anniversary—the 20th anniversary of the signing of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, better known as the Crime Bill—as an inflection point to examine our criminal justice system. The [Justice in Focus: Crime Bill @ 20](#) multimedia initiative brought together nearly 30 distinct voices from the White House to Sesame Street to reflect on how we arrived at our current system, and where to go from here to improve it.

On March 10th, on the heels of another anniversary which marked 50 years since the nonviolent voting-rights march across the bridge of Selma, Alabama, we convened in Washington, DC to share what we've learned from the Justice in Focus initiative. Thirteen participants formed five panels and [discussed the path forward](#) to substantive and lasting reform, from pending federal legislation to local volunteering opportunities.

In one recent example of a bipartisan-led opportunity for both policy and cultural change, Senators Rand Paul (R-KY) and Cory Booker (D-NJ) earlier this month [re-introduced](#) the Record Expungement Designed to Enhance Employment (REDEEM) Act of 2015. The REDEEM Act aims to improve the current recidivism rate (66 percent of formerly incarcerated people return to prison within three years) by reducing the amount of obstacles faced by adults and young people returning to society from prison following a legislative trend of the [41 states that have enacted legislation to mitigate the collateral consequences of conviction since 2009](#). For example, the act would create a path for nonviolent adults to seal their records one year after their sentence is complete in order to help them secure employment and stay in their communities.

The day after the re-introduction of the bipartisan REDEEM Act, Senator Booker [sat down for the keynote interview](#) of the Justice in Focus event with Bill Keller, editor-in-chief of The Marshall Project. Senator Booker began as many voices in our initiative have by looking back at the 1994 Crime Bill. "I think it was dealing with symptoms of problems and not the core root of them," he said. At the same time, he expressed encouragement from the fact that a lot of those folks that participated in and voted in that some of my senior colleagues are now people who are joining in efforts to try to reform the system.

At a time when the bipartisan consensus that criminal justice reform is needed becomes louder and louder, the interview and the other panels at the event spoke to a key issue facing criminal justice reformers today: where to start. When Senator Booker expressed that his goal is to see reforms across the board, Mr. Keller asked him if there is a danger to passing another piece of omnibus legislation. Passing a bill that touches on many of the elements of criminal justice in small way isn't a problem, the senator explained, if we then immediately returned to work on the remaining issues. As a closing call to action, he urged the public to elevate the volume on the issue of criminal justice reform in order to make it a policy priority for elected officials.

We invite you to [watch what our panelists propose](#) for a path forward and encourage you to share your suggestions in the comments below.

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