

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/a-first-step-in-mississippi-toward-sentencing-reform-and-fewer-people-in-prison>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

On Sunday, after a concerted campaign reignited by protests in the wake of George Floyd's death, Mississippi finally [passed legislation](#) to remove the Confederate battle emblem from the state flag. This week, the state is poised to take another step toward addressing racist policies that harm its Black residents: Mississippi's harsh sentencing laws.

Under Mississippi's current parole eligibility laws, two-thirds of people in prison cannot be released early; instead, they must serve every day of their long sentences behind bars. Not coincidentally, most people serving these inhumane sentences are Black Mississippians [disproportionately impacted by sentencing laws](#) put into place at the height of the tough on crime era, with its [barely coded equation of Blackness to criminality](#). But there is hope. Mississippi legislators just passed [SB 2123](#), which will allow most people to be considered for parole, and are considering [HB 1024](#), which will tame portions of the state's so-called repeat offender laws. The fact that Mississippi, [second in the country](#) for incarceration per capita, is moving on this at all and including people convicted of violent offenses in its sweep shows three exciting shifts that may signal a break in the dam for sentencing reform efforts.

First, we're finally upending the narrative that we need to keep so many people in prison, for such a long time, in order to stay safe. Studies demonstrate that [incarceration isn't responsible](#) for [halving the crime rate in Mississippi](#) and elsewhere from the 1990s to now. Theories that tough sentences deter crime, particularly violent crime, which is situational and rarely planned, have been [debunked](#). Moreover, people grow and evolve. People convicted of crimes, even if they once presented a danger to others, may pose far less risk just a [few years later](#).

Second, we're making explicit the racist underpinnings of our sentencing practices and the human loss that results from incarcerating Black people and taking them from their communities. This is especially true in places like Mississippi, where homegrown progressive groups like Mississippi Prison Reform Coalition and Clergy for Prison Reform, which are focused on racial justice and local community support organizations like Empower Mississippi, which is focused on empowering people in their ability to work and contribute to their families and communities, have come together and used personal stories, experiences, and expertise to fight for these bills.

Third, money matters especially as states address yawning budget deficits and may inspire the right thing, even when other measures should but don't. The world watched in late 2019 as violence unfolded inside Mississippi's State Penitentiary, also known as Parchman Farm, which led to [27 deaths](#) and precipitated the state's overdue consideration of drastic reductions to prison sentences. Yet it is likely the threat of not having enough money to sustain the prison population that is putting reform into overdrive. As tragic as this is, the fact that some jurisdictions can't afford their footprint of incarceration is one more reason they should decarcerate through sentencing reform.

We commend the legislature for mustering the moral and political will to significantly increase parole eligibility and urge the governor to walk through the door that the legislature, and his constituents, have opened.

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