Sentencing Times

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INSIDE

RESEARCH

New Report Shows Record 5.85 Million Can't Vote

In the upcoming presidential election, 5.85 million voting-age adults won't be able to cast their ballot because of a felony conviction – a record number according to the widely-quoted study, *State-Level Estimates of Felon Disenfranchisement in the United States, 2010,* from The Sentencing Project. The report was authored by Christopher Uggen and Sarah Shannon of the University of Minnesota, and Jeff Manza of New York University.

One out of every 40 American adults nationwide is barred from the voting booth, up by nine percent from 2004 with the greatest impact on people of color. As noted in the report, "one of every 13 African Americans of voting age is disenfranchised, a rate more than four times greater than non-African Americans." Disenfranchisement is particularly rampant in Southern states such as Alabama, Florida, Kentucky, Mississippi, Tennessee and Virginia, where "more than 7 percent of the adult population cannot vote."

The report received extensive news coverage, including Marc Mauer, Executive Director of The Sentencing Project, being interviewed on National Public Radio. Citing the report, *The New York Times* editorialized that "Until the criminal system is made fairer, the number of people disenfranchised will grow, with blacks unfairly excluded from voting at a much higher rate." *The Washington Post* noted in its

5.85 million can't vote continued on page 3

POLICY

Landmark U.S. Supreme Court Ruling for Juvenile Lifers

In a landmark ruling in June in *Miller v. Alabama,* the U.S. Supreme Court barred the mandatory sentencing of juveniles to life without parole, reinforcing a previous high court ruling that had found the application of these penalties in non-homicide cases to also be unconstitutional.

The high court's ruling recognized what psychologists have long argued – that young people's brains are immature and that youth may act recklessly but have great potential to rehabilitate with age. This is especially important as the United States is the only country in the world that incarcerates juveniles for life without parole.

The Sentencing Project joined an amicus brief of national advocates in support of the petitioners for these cases.

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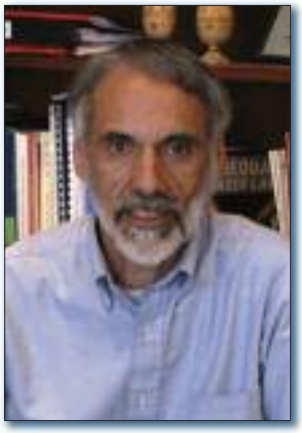
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

Election Year Blackout:

As I write, we're in the midst of a hotly contested presidential campaign with significant implications for the direction of our nation. Given the work I do, I'm frequently asked by friends and colleagues if I think that the candidates will be speaking about criminal justice policy issues. "I hope not," I respond.



Marc Mauer, Executive Director

It pains me to say that, but at the present moment I fear that having a primetime discussion of these issues risks setting back the substantial momentum for reform that has developed over the past decade. I say this because we've seen this all too often in the past. Some may recall the infamous "Willie Horton" ads of the Bush campaign of 1988, playing on racist imagery to strike a message of fear among voters. Or Bill Clinton leaving the campaign trail in New Hampshire in 1992 to return to Arkansas to oversee the execution of mentally impaired Ricky Ray Rector. Or the debate during the 2000 campaign at which both candidates affirmed their belief in the deterrent value of the death penalty.

My main concern is that by airing a national discussion of crime and justice issues, there's a risk that one or both candidates may articulate an uninformed or hardened position on criminal justice policy that they will then be committed to supporting if elected.

One could also argue, though, that a candidate could make a compelling case for criminal justice reform based on the encouraging developments of recent years. As is now well documented, drug and sentencing policy reforms, strategic approaches to policing, and reentry initiatives have been broadly embraced by both Republicans and Democrats at the state level. And in Washington, D.C., we've seen bipartisan support for legislation such as the Second Chance Act and the Fair Sentencing Act.

Even the party platforms, despite support for some of the punitive policies of recent decades, are reasonably open-minded about a number of criminal justice issues. The Republicans, for example, support efforts of government to "work with faith-based institutions that have proven track records in diverting young and first-time, non-violent offenders from criminal careers," as well as prisons that "do more than punish; they should attempt to rehabilitate and institute proven prisoner reentry systems to reduce recidivism." Similarly, the Democratic platform is "committed to ending racial… profiling" and supports "local prison-to-work programs and other initiatives to reduce recidivism."

So, why then are candidates so reluctant to take on these issues? I realize that there are many competing issues of concern to voters, particularly in a time of economic crisis. But it seems to me that two other factors can help us understand this reluctance. First, despite the progress of recent years, old ideas die hard. To campaign consultants and pollsters, the thought of explaining the nuance of a more balanced approach to public safety may feel risky if you're still recalling the days when candidates feared they would fade quickly if labeled "soft on crime."

And secondly, it's about race and class. It's no secret that our courts and prisons are disproportionately comprised of people of color. And no matter how far we've come on enhancing racial justice – and we have come very far – there's still a great deal of skittishness in addressing these issues on a large stage. Also, according to most political leaders, we're all now "middle class." So it's rare to hear any sustained discussion about poverty or disadvantage, issues that are at the core of criminal justice concerns.

Given these dynamics, what can we do? I hope that sometime in the not too distant future we can actually welcome a discussion about public safety policy during a presidential campaign. These issues are of concern to all Americans, so why would we not want to hear them debated? But I think this will only take place once we have succeeded in enacting broader-based reforms and communicating their viability to the public at large. A good deal of progress has been made in that direction, but many political consultants don't know that yet. So that's our challenge moving forward.

5.85 million can't vote continued from page 1

editorial: "Although states have made advances in restoring voting rights to felons who've completed parole, the franchise should be automatically restored after a sentence is completed."

Indeed, Florida, already the state with the highest rate of disenfranchisement, made it even harder for people with felony records to regain their voting rights. Gov. Rick Scott reversed his predecessor Gov. Charlie Crist's policy that had eased the restoration process for people convicted of non-violent offenses.

Now persons seeking to restore their rights in Florida must wait five years before submitting an application — an edict that contributes to nearly a quarter of African American adults in Florida and one-tenth of the state's voting-age population being disenfranchised.

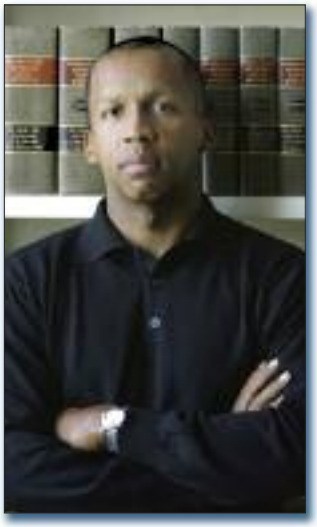
Florida is also one of 11 states (six in the South) that permanently bar voting by some or all persons with felony convictions, unless they go through a process of civil rights restoration that can take years even after prescribed waiting periods.

Only Maine and Vermont impose no voting restrictions on individuals with felony convictions.

Studies have shown that allowing formerly incarcerated people to vote contributes to lowering recidivism and supporting reintegration into communities. But the number of disenfranchised voters, particularly African Americans, is likely to grow until the criminal justice system is made more equitable and states reconsider their disenfranchisement policies.

Supreme Court Ruling continued from page 1

Leading up to the high court's consideration of the issue, The Sentencing Project released findings from the first-ever national self-report survey of juveniles serving life without parole sentences. *The Lives of Juvenile Lifers: Findings from a National Survey* by Dr. Ashley Nellis, a research analyst with The Sentencing Project, was the product of a year-long survey of juveniles in prison nationwide.



Attorney Bryan Stevenson argued the juvenile life without parole case before the Supreme Court.

Nellis received more than 1,600 responses to her survey, revealing that many youth experienced high rates of socioeconomic disadvantage, extreme racial disparities in the imposition of their punishments, sentences often imposed without judicial discretion, and corrections policies that undermined rehabilitation.

Among the findings:

- Juvenile lifers, especially girls, suffered high rates of abuse – nearly half (46.9%) of lifers experienced physical abuse, including 79.5 % among girls.
- Juvenile lifers were exposed to high levels of violence in their homes (79%) and their communities (54.1%).
- African American youth constitute 43.4% of life without parole sentences for a murder with a white victim, nearly twice the rate at which they are arrested for such crimes, 23.7%.

The Sentencing Project maintains a strong commitment to juvenile justice reforms that recognize the limited culpability of juveniles, the prospects for enhanced rehabilitation, and the need for a separate court system for young people who break the law.

More states now affirm that adult court is an inappropriate venue for handling youth cases and have passed legislation that supports limiting juvenile transfer. In addition, there is increasing support for keeping delinquent youth out of secure placement and instead treating them in their communities when possible and appropriate.

In the coming year, The Sentencing Project will continue to work toward eliminating life sentences for juveniles by providing research and advocacy support at the national and state level.

Race to Incarcerate – 2013

Marc Mauer's seminal book on race, class, and the criminal justice system, will reach new audiences in 2013 when it is reissued in "graphic novel" format.

Public Education

The Sentencing Project has made presentations to the following organizations and institutions in the past year:

American Bar Association, Racial Justice Improvement Project
American Public Health Association
American Society of Criminology
American University
Black Methodists for Church Renewal
Center for American Progress
Child Welfare League of America
Congressional Black Caucus
Congressional Hunger Center Fellows
Dane County (WI) Office of Equal Opportunity
Drug Policy Alliance
Eastern State Penitentiary
Florida International University College of Law
Fortune Society
Georgetown University Law School
Grinnell College
Human Rights First
International Community Corrections Association
International Drug Policy Consortium (England)
Kansas City Civil Rights Summit
Madison (WI) Community Advocates Policy Institute
Maryland Committee on Disproportionate Minority Contract
Maryland State Bar Association

Public Education continued on page 4

POLICY

Federal Update: Hope for Bipartisan Reform

The gulf between Republicans and Democrats has never been wider. On issue after issue, our two major political parties too often disagree.

But in at least one area of public policy, there is growing bipartisan agreement: a plurality of American voters says that too many people are in prison. An overwhelming majority – including voters across political, generational, and racial lines – want policies that would exchange prisons for more effective alternatives.

Though opportunities for reform during an election year are slim, The Sentencing Project has continued to engage policymakers on a broad range of criminal justice issues.

I**n testimony earlier this year, we urged the United States Sentencing Commission to review the practices that have led to intolerable racial disparities in federal sentencing.** We also weighed in on the Commission's proposed priorities for the coming year, encouraging the Commission to work with Congress to examine unnecessary mandatory minimum penalties and to assess the potential for less harsh sentencing as part of its multi-year study on recidivism.

In testimony submitted to a Senate Judiciary hearing in August on rising prison costs, we highlighted actions that the Obama Administration could take to address the growth in the federal prison system, including reducing prosecutions of low level drug sellers, expanding the Residential Drug Abuse Treatment Program, and expanding the use of compassionate release to reduce prison costs while ensuring public safety. The President could also finish the work of the Fair Sentencing Act by considering commutation for persons incarcerated for crack cocaine offenses.

Unfortunately, the Administration's budget for the next fiscal year proposed $6.9 billion for the federal prison system – an increase of $278 million over the previous year. **We strongly urged appropriators to reject this proposed spending, which would have included funds for new prison beds and the activation of new prisons.** In September, the President signed an FY 2013 Continuing Resolution that will fund the government through March 2013 at last year's spending levels.

On Capitol Hill, we continue to work with Senator Webb and our coalition partners to advance the National Criminal Justice Commission Act, which would examine our nation's criminal justice system and recommend reforms. Though few legislative days remain, we are hopeful that the current Congress will take up and approve this legislation, which has in the past enjoyed bipartisan support in both chambers. If Congress fails to act, we would encourage the Obama Administration to consider establishing such a commission by executive order.

Despite paralysis in Congress, some quiet but important developments offer a glimmer of hope. At a recent Senate hearing, members of both parties suggested that we should cut prison costs by reducing the number of people incarcerated. We welcome bipartisan agreement on the need to reduce incarceration.

Whatever the reason – drops in crime, less "lock 'em up" rhetoric, budget pressures – there continues to be consensus that our approach to crime and punishment is both ineffective and too expensive. We have a moment of opportunity to address the policies and practices that might reduce our prison population while increasing public safety – it is a moment we cannot afford to lose.

Your Support Makes A Difference

Support our efforts to promote fair and effective criminal justice policies and alternatives to incarceration by sending a contribution today.

Contribute online at
www.sentencingproject.org,
or send a check to:
The Sentencing Project,
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Washington, DC 20036.

Make a long-term investment in sentencing reform

For information about how you can make a bequest or a stock gift to The Sentencing Project, please contact Marc Levin at (202) 628-0871.

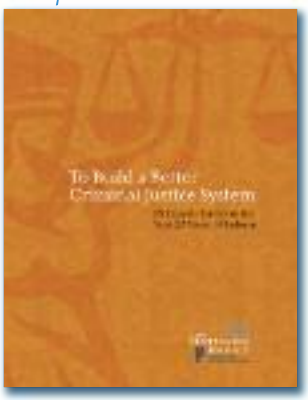
Public Education continued from page 3

Mental Health in Corrections Consortium
Ministry of Justice (UK)
National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers
National Black Law Students Association
National Committee on Community Corrections
National Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect
National Employment Law Project
National Judicial Institute (Canada)
New York Avenue Presbyterian Church (DC)
Oklahoma Faith Conference on Criminal Justice
Payne Theological Seminary
Princeton University Center for African American Studies
Princeton University School of Public and International Affairs
Rowan University
Rutgers University
Southern Christian Leadership Conference (Maryland)
Texas Center for the Judiciary
U.S. Sentencing Commission
United Methodist Church
University of Minnesota
University of Pennsylvania Law School
University of Texas, LBJ School of Public Affairs
University of Wisconsin Law School
U.S. House Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism and Homeland Security
Washington Office on Latin America
Yale University Law School

Reports Review Health Care Reform, Prison Privatization, Party Platforms and Trends in Corrections

In 2012, The Sentencing Project published a variety of policy reports examining key criminal justice issues.

As part of The Sentencing Project's 25th anniversary celebration, we produced *To Build a Better Criminal Justice System: 25 Experts Envision the Next 25 Years of Reform.*



In 25 essays, leading thinkers in the field, including academics like Jeremy Travis, President of John Jay College of Criminal Justice; practitioners like Charles J. Hynes, District Attorney of Kings County, Brooklyn, New York; policy advocates like Wilbert Rideau, former prison journalist and noted author; and international advocates like Baroness Vivien Stern, founder of Penal Reform International, take a broad and diverse look at how the United States can maintain public safety without relying on a world-record level of incarceration.

Too Good to be True – Private Prisons in America challenges the alleged cost savings of private prisons.

In 2010 private prisons held 128,195 individuals, representing eight percent of America's total prison population and an 80 percent increase compared to 1999.

This growth has been fueled by claims that private prisons provide equal or superior services compared to publicly operated facilities, and at a lower cost.

The Sentencing Project report details the history of the movement to privatize prisons in America and documents the increase in their use. It also examines the purported ability of private prisons to provide the same level of services as publicly operated facilities, but at a lower cost, as well as the lobbying and contribution activities of private prisons on the state and federal level.

The Sentencing Project published a brief, ***The Affordable Care Act: Implications for Public Safety and Corrections Populations.*** The new federal health care reform law gives states the option to expand Medicaid coverage to all individuals with incomes below 133% of the federal poverty level with the federal government covering all or most of the expenditures for the newly eligible population.

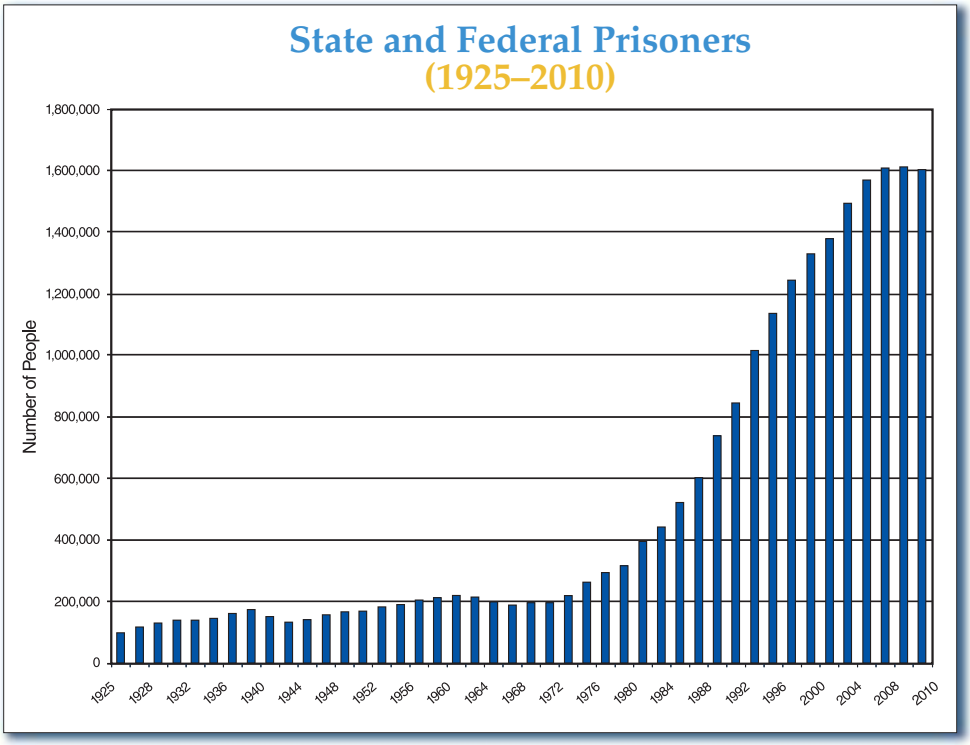
Also, prevention, early intervention, and treatment of mental health and substance abuse problems will be covered benefits under the new law. Many people who are at-risk for being incarcerated as well as those re-entering the community after being incarcerated will be among those who are newly eligible for Medicaid.

Because mental health and substance abuse problems contribute to people cycling through the jails and prisons, states that opt to expand Medicaid will have the opportunity to develop new pathways for diverting people from prison and reducing recidivism.

In conjunction with the presidential election, The Sentencing Project published, ***2012 Party Platforms on Criminal Justice Policy.*** The publication compares key areas of criminal justice policy in the two major party platforms, providing information for voters, and policymakers alike to forge a path to bipartisan criminal justice reform.

The Sentencing Project also published ***Trends in U.S. Corrections,*** a visual tool that provides a compilation of key developments in the criminal justice system over the past several decades. Among the issues featured are:

- Rates of incarceration from 1925 to 2010
- International comparisons of incarceration rates
- Changes in the drug offender composition of prison populations over time
- Racial/ethnic disparities by gender in incarceration



STATE POLICY

Missouri Adopts Crack Cocaine Sentencing Reform

Following adoption of the Fair Sentencing Act in 2010, thousands of persons sentenced for federal crack cocaine offenses will now receive less harsh prison terms. Less known, though, is the fact that 12 states maintain a sentencing disparity between crack and powder cocaine as well. Of these, the drug quantity disparity in Missouri had been the highest in the nation, at a 75 to 1 ratio. In response to the growing political momentum on this issue, Missouri enacted crack sentencing reform in 2012 with bipartisan support.

House Speaker Steve Tilley (R) lobbied to include the reform in a larger criminal justice bill, and lawmakers reduced the sentencing disparity to 18-to-1 by modifying the quantity amounts that trigger felony offenses for crack and powder cocaine. The Sentencing Project played an active role in support of legislators advocating for change, and the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* reported, "The move to lessen the crack/powder disparity follows a report from

Missouri House Speaker, Steve Tilley

The Sentencing Project... It showed that Missouri had the highest weight-based

State Policy continued on page 7

Profiles: New Staff

Jean Chung

PROGRAM ASSOCIATE

After graduating from Emory University in May 2011, I completed a one-year fellowship program through the Congressional Hunger Center. The fellowship is a leadership development program that focuses on domestic hunger and poverty, examining those issues through an anti-racist lens.

Learning to see the world through this lens radically transformed my worldview, and it wasn't long before I had developed a passion for racial justice. It was this passion that led me to criminal justice reform work; after all, where has racism been institutionalized more effectively – and with more devastating consequences for communities of color – than in our criminal justice system?

During my six-month fellowship placement at the Justice Policy Institute, I interviewed advocates, judicial officials, and individuals with firsthand experience in the Baltimore bail system about their experiences. Across the board, what I heard echoed what data have shown for years: that a bail system that primarily relies on money to determine pretrial release or detention fails to protect public safety or assure return to court and succeeds in disproportionately locking up low-income people and people of color.

As a new member of the team, I couldn't be more excited about contributing to The Sentencing Project's continuing efforts to advocate for racial justice and promote alternatives to incarceration. In my free time, I enjoy rock climbing, playing with other people's dogs, and practicing my Sarah Palin impression.

Jeremy Haile

FEDERAL ADVOCACY COORDINATOR

"I was naked, and you clothed me; sick, and you visited me; in prison, and you came to me." It's one of the most powerful sacred writings. I remember reading it in college and thinking that if religion meant anything, it must mean caring about people who are vulnerable.

So I began making regular trips to the local prison outside Abilene, Texas, to talk with mostly black and brown men who were locked up. At the time, some politicians were complaining about televisions in prisons, which supposedly made the whole experience too easy. My lasting sense was the absolute tedium that people on the inside must feel. I remained pen pals with a few.

Later, I worked with homeless people in Dallas, spent two years as a Peace Corps volunteer in Armenia, and served on Capitol Hill. In every job, I tried to pursue justice – a very SERIOUS pursuit.

Fortunately, I am married to the funniest person I know. My wife Jen, who has been my companion for 17 years, reminds me to have fun. When we're not working, we see friends, go running or bicycling together, and travel around the world.

Susan Phillips

RESEARCH ANALYST

My interest in criminal justice policy began back in the mid-1990s when, as a student intern, I was involved in the implementation of the first drug court in Arkansas.

After graduation I was hired through a grant to develop services and affect policy reform to address the needs of children whose mothers were in the custody of the Arkansas Department of Correction. At the time, we were only beginning to understand the harm being done to children, families, and communities by mass incarceration policies, and only a handful of people across the country were systematically compiling information on the lives of children with parents in prison.

My career as a researcher began because of the lack of data about these children. I've had the good fortune to work with groups of highly talented researchers and to contribute to our current understanding of how the failure of public systems confers disadvantage from one generation to the next.

My interest now is in policy reforms to reverse the sprawl of the carceral state and redirect resources from corrections to innovative models of trans-systemic intervention in urban neighborhoods most affected by crime and incarceration. I hope my work will befit the legacy of The Sentencing Project.

State Policy continued from page 6

disparity between crack and powder cocaine charges at a 75-to-1 ratio." The Sentencing Project has also assisted efforts to eliminate disparities in Oklahoma and New Hampshire.

Reforms in state sentencing policy continued in other parts of the country, too. Our annual review of state legislative initiatives, *The State of Sentencing 2011: Developments in Policy and Practice,* reported that legislatures in at least 29 states adopted 55 criminal justice policies that may contribute to continued population reductions. These included relaxing mandatory minimums for crack cocaine offenses in Ohio, authorizing sentence modifications in Nebraska, and expanding drug court eligibility in Florida and Idaho.

Staff of The Sentencing Project have supported local and state campaigns in several states this year. In Wisconsin, Nicole Porter keynoted a statewide event of faith leaders and lawmakers in August on strategies to reduce state prison populations. In Maryland we provided technical assistance to Delegate Geraldine Valentino-Smith, who introduced racial impact legislation and a measure to expand expungement relief for certain juveniles. Nicole Porter was also invited to present testimony to the Maryland State Advisory Committee of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights on addressing racial disparities in state incarceration.

Nicole Porter, Director of Advocacy for The Sentencing Project

The Sentencing Project staff also provided support to sentencing reform advocates in a number of states this year, including:

- Supporting and providing legislation in California and Colorado to modify penalties for low level drug offenses.
- Supporting legislation and providing technical legislation to repeal Delaware's 5-year waiting period for restoration of voting rights for persons with felony convictions.
- Supporting an Oklahoma measure to relax mandatory minimums for low level drug offenses.
- Providing technical assistance to oppose legislation in Florida, Michigan and New Hampshire that would expand prison privatization.
- Hosting webinars that highlighted advocacy strategies to advance racial justice legislation in North Carolina, eliminate collateral consequences in Ohio, and enact sentencing reforms in Washington state.
- Supporting measures in Missouri to eliminate collateral consequences, including authorizing access for public benefits and public housing.
- Supporting legislation and technical assistance to eliminate juvenile life without parole for certain offenses in California.

MEDIA:

The Sentencing Project in the News

The New York Times

July 15, 2012

Editorial: Disenfranchised Felons

The number of Americans who cannot vote because they have been convicted of a felony continues to grow. **The Sentencing Project reported Thursday that in 2010 5.5 million voting-age citizens were disenfranchised because of their criminal records, up by 9 percent from 2004.**

About a quarter are in prison, but the rest have completed their sentences or are on probation or parole. The only reason not to let them vote is to stigmatize them or to continue punishing them. Only Maine and Vermont impose no voting restrictions on felons or ex-felons.

The other states impose various restrictions, with 11 states (six in the South) banning ex-felons from voting even after they have completed prison and probation or parole. These limits are seriously counterproductive. Former offenders who are allowed to vote are less likely to return to prison and more likely to become reintegrated into their communities.

npr

March 20, 2012

Without Parole, Juveniles Face Bleak Life in Prison

We hear a lot about juvenile offenders when they commit a crime – and again, when they're sentenced to spend the rest of their lives in prison. But not much is known about what happens after the prison gates slam shut.

For the first time, researchers are starting to fill in the blanks – with a survey of nearly 1,600 young people serving life without the possibility of parole. They say the U.S. is the only country that sentences juveniles to life without the chance of release.

Ashley Nellis led the effort for the nonprofit group the Sentencing Project.

"You know, these offenders are more than just the worst mistake of their lives," Nellis says. "And it's important to find out what else was going on in their life, before and after."

H *The Huffington Post*

February 8, 2012

Marc Mauer: "I Was Stopped, But Not Frisked"

Behind the searing light, a man yelled. "This is the police. Put your hands up."

I was only five minutes from home, walking through an unlighted stretch on my way to the community center to

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ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

The Sentencing Project

Established in 1986, The Sentencing Project works for a fair and effective U.S. criminal justice system by promoting reforms in sentencing policy, addressing unjust racial disparities and practices, and advocating for alternatives to incarceration.

To these ends, it seeks to recast the public debate on crime and punishment.

To receive news and updates from The Sentencing Project electronically, send an email to: staff@sentencingproject.org

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work out in my Silver Spring, Maryland, neighborhood, an MP3 of Stevie Wonder crooning in my ear. The light hit me in the face and I fumbled to turn down the music, but raised my hands…

The officer appeared out of the dark, shining the light beam in my face. All business, he said: "What are you doing out here?"

"I'm on my way to the community center," I said.

"Okay," he said. "Move on."

I happen to be the executive director of a national criminal justice reform organization, but I'm also a middle-aged white guy. We all know that lots of privileges go along with that status, but I was reminded of it by my encounter with this officer…

The Washington Post

July 29, 2012

Editorial: A lifetime sentence for felons

In 1965, when he signed the Voting Rights Act, Lyndon B. Johnson called the vote "the most powerful instrument ever devised by man for breaking down injustice and destroying the terrible walls which imprison men because they are different from other men." In the midst of the civil rights movement, Johnson sounded a call to arms against racial disenfranchisement. Nearly 50 years later, that unfortunately remains a battle.

In an election year when many states have added dubious voter ID requirements sure to affect minority voters disproportionately, another set of impediments to the franchise worsens the problem: laws in 11 states, including Virginia, that disenfranchise felons. Given that African Americans constitute 38.2 percent of the prison population but just 12.6 percent of the general population, a disproportionate share of these disenfranchised people are black.

According to a study released this month by The Sentencing Project, about 7.7 percent of the African American voting-age population is disenfranchised, compared with 1.8 percent of the non-African American population. In Virginia, Kentucky and Florida, felon disenfranchisement affects a staggering one in five African Americans. There's no excuse for that.

madison.com

August 21, 2012

Faith leaders tackle prison project

The "11x15 campaign" is an ambitious effort launched in February by a cross section of Wisconsin's faith leaders with the goal of reducing the state's prison population from its current size of about 22,000 inmates to 11,000 by the end of 2015.

The current system, the group says, is wasteful, ineffective and unfair because of racial disparities.

"There are a lot of states trying to control their prison populations," said Nicole Porter, director of advocacy for The Sentencing Project, who was scheduled to address legislators and others at the state Capitol. "Where Wisconsin is a leader and possibly a model is that this work is being done by the faith community, which is unusual and admirable."