

# A BLUEPRINT FOR A SAFER AND MORE JUST AMERICA

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**Our criminal justice system is responsible for balancing the need for security within our communities with the freedoms and opportunities that every person needs to live a dignified life. Right now, across the country, we are not striking the right balance.**

We lock up more people than any other country on Earth. We criminalize poverty, needlessly separate children from their parents, discard people who make mistakes, and destabilize and destroy families — especially Black and brown families — and even entire neighborhoods. Instead of treating people with respect and dignity, our culture of policing and punishment routinely makes people more vulnerable — not only the people we over-police and over-punish, but all of us.

We need to reform the components of our criminal justice system that are costly, counterproductive, and cruel. We are safer when we use jail not as a default, but as a last resort. If we cut our over-reliance on incarceration we can unlock resources and create a stronger social fabric with more opportunity and justice for everyone, not just a few.

Crime, including violent crime, remains lower than it has been in 50 years. Today, however, we incarcerate at five times the rate than we did back then. We aren't any safer, but we are a lot less free. The United States is sprinting in the opposite direction of other developed democracies. Americans are not inherently more dangerous than the citizens of the rest of the world. We need a radical realignment to get back on track before our society collapses under the weight of the social and economic costs of over-incarceration.

We need a criminal justice system that monitors and incarcerates as few people as necessary for as little time as necessary to keep our communities safe. We need a system that is tightly coupled to physical safety, recognizes that every person has inherent worth and potential for change, treats each person with dignity and respect, and does not squander limited resources that should be used for other services and programs better suited for creating healthier and safer communities.

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## **STOP MAKING POVERTY INTO A CRIME**

No person in America should be locked up because they are too poor. But right now we have homeless people arrested for sleeping outside; parents who can't afford to purchase their release from jail; and people who cycle in and out of jail because they can't afford to pay old fines even as new ones pile on. Worse yet, we have corporations making billions of dollars on the backs of our poorest communities. From bail bondsmen to private probation companies, people are getting rich off suffering and incarceration. Even cities and counties fill their coffers from the fines and fees that are imposed upon people who are struggling just to survive. We need a criminal justice system that puts people over profit, and that helps to make vulnerable people more stable, not less stable.

- 1. End money bail and drastically reduce the pretrial jail population in America.*
- 2. End all fees associated with any diversion, treatment, or community supervision program. All costs should be borne by the government.*
- 3. End all court fees, public defender fees, and other costs that ask poor people to subsidize the criminal justice system.*
- 4. Stop imposing incarceration due to an inability to pay fines or fees.*
- 5. Make phone calls free for all people who are incarcerated in jails and prisons in America.*
- 6. Prohibit the criminalization of behavior that stems from extreme poverty, including sitting or sleeping in parks or on sidewalks and benches.*

## TREAT KIDS LIKE KIDS

Children's brains continue developing until around the age of 25 and research supports their enhanced capacity for growth and rehabilitation. Children should not be prosecuted in adult court, nor should they be given punishments that preclude the opportunity for redemption.

1. *Never try a child under the age of 21 in adult court.*
  2. *End juvenile life without parole and de facto life sentences.*
  3. *Stop all criminal charges for school-based disciplinary behavior.*
  4. *Close every youth prison in America.*
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## ALLOW PEOPLE TO GROW AND CHANGE

Often the consequences that come along with a conviction, such as restrictions on available housing and hurdles to finding employment and obtaining loans for school interfere with people's ability to turn the page and create a productive life for themselves. A criminal act does not define a person forever. We know that people grow and change. As kids mature into adults, their judgment and emotional stability improves. People who suffer from addiction and other mental illnesses can receive treatment. Other people find faith, or stability and meaning in their work, or just find hope for a life that is better than the one they lived before. We should provide everyone with the opportunity to change; and, if they do, we should provide pathways back home to their families and communities.

1. *No one should be sentenced to a term of more than 15 years without a meaningful opportunity for release.*
  2. *Institute presumptive parole for every person who served 20 years and is at least 50 years old.*
  3. *End mandatory minimums.*
  4. *End the death penalty.*
  5. *Radically increase the availability and use of executive clemency.*
  6. *Make record expungement the norm: All offenses should be eligible for expungement after 10 years; most offenses should be automatically expunged after 5 years; and many others should be automatically expunged upon release.*
  7. *Remove legal and regulatory barriers to housing, education, and employment so that people returning home from jail or prison can build a stable and productive life.*
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## TREAT ADDICTION LIKE THE MEDICAL ISSUE THAT IT IS

By any objective measure, the war on drugs is a failure. Over the past four decades, federal and state governments have poured an estimated \$1 trillion into this effort. The regressive set of policies and policing practices that make up the drug war have failed to reduce drug use or availability. But what the drug war has successfully accomplished is driving up violent crime and crowding out more effective therapeutic solutions for dealing with drug addiction.

1. *No person should be incarcerated for drug possession.*
  2. *Decriminalize buprenorphine possession and ensure that every police officer and first responder carries naloxone to prevent opioid overdoses.*
  3. *Legalize safe injection sites and open locations throughout the United States.*
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## END CYCLES OF VIOLENCE

Stopping violence is about understanding and addressing the circumstances that cause violence to erupt and spread. Law enforcement plays a critical role in this process. We have a national crisis of low-solve rates for homicides, creating the impression in neighborhoods across the country that we do not value people enough to solve the murders of their loved ones and making it seem like it is possible to get away with murder. This low-solve rate problem is especially corrosive because law enforcement agencies continue to use their limited public safety resources to combat low-level offenses like marijuana usage while leaving the most serious crimes unsolved. This is not only a waste of precious public safety resources, but also a recipe for further undermining the trust that communities have in the people sworn to serve and protect them. But law enforcement is not the only, or even the most important, answer to addressing cycles of violence. In fact, we ask law enforcement to do far too much to triage the problems that arise from our frayed social fabric. We have to be able to invest significant resources outside of the law enforcement paradigm to make sure we're interrupting cycles of violence. And we must be ready to provide targeted resources to people who are victims of serious physical harm and to those who are most at risk of being a future perpetrator or victim of violence.

1. *Focus law enforcement resources to dramatically increase the solve rate of the most serious offenses, such as shootings, homicides, and sexual assaults.*
  2. *Provide resources for non-law-enforcement-led, community-based violence interruption models.*
  3. *Provide real and sustained resources to crime survivors and their families, including mental health treatments costs, trauma services, victim relocations services, and help covering basic needs such as housing, food, and transportation.*
  4. *Fund programs for people who are at serious risk of being either the perpetrator or victim of gun violence, provide non-law-enforcement-led services including job training and placement assistance, education, and help covering basic needs such as housing, food, and transportation.*
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## END UNNECESSARY FAMILY SEPARATION

When a person is locked in jail or prison, it is often a whole family that suffers. Lost wages, even temporarily, can mean losing an apartment or home. An imprisoned parent could mean foster care for a child. And, ultimately, when the person comes back home into the community, which is almost always the case, it becomes even harder to find a job, find stable housing, and contribute to one's family and community. That's why the goal should always be to use jail or prison as a last resort and only when it is absolutely necessary to protect the physical safety of the community. Whenever possible, people who commit harm should be held accountable in their communities. That's not only better for that person, but often for their whole family, too.

1. *No sentence for an offense that does not involve serious physical harm should exceed ten years.*
  2. *No adult should be incarcerated for consensual sex.*
  3. *End jail time for technical violations of community-based supervision.*
  4. *No person should be forced to leave America based solely on a criminal arrest or conviction.*
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## **MAKE PEOPLE AND THEIR COMMUNITIES STRONGER**

There are times when a person must be confined for the physical safety of the community. We should always make sure that we are not needlessly making people who are incarcerated more vulnerable and traumatized. We should instead try to make sure people live as normally as possible while confined, have an opportunity to strengthen their connection to our democracy, and have an opportunity to become healthier, more stable people when they return to their families and communities.

- 1. End solitary confinement; a barbaric practice that needlessly makes people more vulnerable and traumatized at a point when they need the exact opposite.*
- 2. Restore the right to vote during and after their incarceration.*
- 3. Provide educational and vocational training, and mental health and addiction treatment, to all people locked in jail and prison.*
- 4. Pay all incarcerated people real wages for labor.*
- 5. End the use of lifetime offense-based registries and mandatory residency restrictions, two absolutist practices that create needless stigma and cruelty, ultimately making people less stable and undermining their ability to lead productive lives in the community.*
- 6. Shorten the length of probation and other forms of community supervision so that terms are no longer than necessary to protect the physical safety of the community.*