

# Congress of the United States

## House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM

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### Opening Statement Ranking Member Elijah E. Cummings

#### Hearing on "Criminal Justice Reform, Part I" July 14, 2015

I want to start by extending my sincere thanks to Chairman Chaffetz. I am so grateful, Mr. Chairman, for the way that you and your staff have worked with us over the past six months to put these critical hearings together in a truly bipartisan manner. People have no idea how challenging it can be to line up such impressive panels of Members of Congress, Governors, and some of our nation's most noted experts, so I am thankful this day has finally come.

I first wrote to the Chairman in December, and I requested hearings to examine a wide range of factors leading to the deaths of unarmed African Americans at the hands of law enforcement across the country, including the federal response to these incidents.

In February, I followed up with specific proposals, including a hearing with officials from the state level—including both Democratic and Republican governors who have had bipartisan success. States are sometimes called our nation's laboratories for reform, and they have led the way in addressing underlying problems with our criminal justice system.

I also hosted a bipartisan forum at Howard University, bringing together voices as diverse as Senator Cory Booker, who is here with us today, Senator Rand Paul, Congressman Raul Labrador, Congressman Hakeem Jeffries, and our own Congresswoman Stacey Plaskett.

For me, this issue truly hit home—literally—as I watched my community of Baltimore torn apart after the tragic death of Freddie Gray. Watching the place I have always called home erupt into violence underscored the urgent need to examine the systemic problems facing our criminal justice system at its core.

This is a landmark hearing for our Committee. We have a unique ability to explore criminal justice reform. Our broad jurisdiction allows us to examine policies across all agencies of the federal government, as well as successful state and local reforms.

As we will hear over the course of these hearings, the United States has 5% of the world's population, but we have almost 25% of the world's prison population. That's the highest incarceration rate of any country in the world.

These statistics are stunning, and tragic. Right now, we have a historic moment of opportunity on criminal justice reform, and we must strive to turn that moment into a movement. To do that, I firmly believe Congress must act in a bipartisan way to pass comprehensive legislation.

As we review successful state-level policies, we will see that there is no one policy that is a cure-all. Instead, reforms must address the full spectrum of issues, including how people enter the criminal system in the first place, what happens to them when they are incarcerated, and how they reenter society after their release. It must also take into account the racial disparities that plague our system, and how young people, women, and other populations are uniquely affected.

Today, we will hear about the SAFE Justice Act, which was introduced by Chairman Sensenbrenner of the Subcommittee on Crime and Ranking Member Scott of the Committee on Education and the Workforce. This is a bipartisan, balanced bill that implements policies based on evidence, and these proposals have proven successful at the state level.

The SAFE Justice Act is truly bipartisan and broad-based. It reduces the duplication of federal and state charges, clarifies original Congressional intent regarding certain drug sentences, and encourages alternative courts like drug and veterans' courts. It also reinvests savings to strengthen communities and ensure that law enforcement officers have what they need to do their jobs effectively.

We will also hear about state-level efforts to "Ban the Box," and prevent employers from asking about criminal histories at the outset of the application process. We cannot perpetuate a system in which people have nowhere to go other than a life of crime.

I commend the President for his actions yesterday to commute the sentences of 46 drug offenders whose punishments did not match the crimes committed. But we also need policies to help individuals who leave prison to be considered for jobs based on their merits and fitness for those positions, rather than their criminal records.

Currently, 18 states and more than 100 cities and counties across the political spectrum have taken steps to implement these types of fair chance hiring policies. Major private sector companies like Wal-Mart, Target, Home Depot, and Koch Industries are also recognizing the benefits of these efforts, and they have implemented their own fair chance hiring policies.

For these reasons, I am very pleased to be working with Senator Booker on bicameral legislation to bring these policies to the federal government.

Thank you all for being here today. I am eager to learn more about your efforts as we work to turn this historic moment into a bipartisan movement. Thank you again, Mr. Chairman, for your leadership on this issue.

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