

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 II" July 15, 2015

I want to start by thanking Chairman Chaffetz again, as well as all the other Members of the Committee, for the productive discussion we are having on how to make significant, bipartisan, lasting improvements to our criminal justice system. I also want to thank my esteemed colleagues that testified with such passion yesterday about these issues.

Criminal justice reform is personal to me, and I have seen the problems that plague the system through many lenses. I have seen them during my days as a young lawyer, representing criminal defendants in Baltimore. I have seen them as a state representative who has deep respect for the dedicated police officers that serve their communities. I have seen them as a Congressman representing a district where finding balance between law and order and crime and punishment is of profound concern for my constituents. And this year, I have seen them as a citizen of my community—Baltimore, a city where I have lived my whole life, which erupted after the tragic death of Freddie Gray.

Unfortunately, one lens that has not changed nearly enough is the lens of color. I continue to see African-Americans in this country facing daunting economic challenges, disproportionately high rates of poverty, and severe unemployment. There are too many communities of color that are missing family members, especially fathers, sons, and brothers who are in jail.

African Americans are incarcerated at nearly six times the rate of whites. When these men leave prison, they come home to the same communities where they struggled to begin with. However, they return with a big mark on their backs—the mark of a convicted felon.

In some cases, they lose their driver's licenses, they are ineligible for occupational licenses, and they have great difficulty finding employment. When they can't find a job, many return to what they know—they commit more crimes, and the cycle starts over again.

Senator Booker spoke eloquently yesterday about the 2.7 million children who have incarcerated parents, and the one in nine African American children who have parents behind bars. These kids are more likely to be suspended from school and to go to prison themselves. This is how the cycle continues to the next generation.

As I mentioned yesterday, my brother is a public defender, and he is now seeing families with three generations in the criminal justice system—grandfathers, sons, and grandsons together. We must do better.

We cannot stand by while these alarming disparities and destructive cycles persist generation after generation. We owe it to generations yet unborn to make lasting changes that provide opportunities and hope. We need to invest in reform now so the next generation can escape this cycle of despair.

As I said yesterday, these hearings are a landmark moment for our Committee. We have heard about groundbreaking legislative proposals like the evidence-based and bipartisan SAFE Justice Act. We have learned how states are “Banning the Box” and how private sector companies like Wal-Mart and Koch Industries are changing their approaches so those with criminal records are not automatically disqualified from all employment.

Governor Bentley talked yesterday about the importance of providing top-notch pre-kindergarten education for all children in Alabama. Governor Markell talked about a women’s prison in Delaware that hosted a culinary festival featuring the work of inmates alongside established, professional chefs.

These advancements are happening because we are coming to understand that we cannot look at our criminal justice system in a vacuum. We need to take a comprehensive approach to criminal justice reform.

We have a unique moment of bipartisan momentum for true reform, and it is ours to seize, but momentum is nothing without action. My hope is that these hearings inspire strong action. My Republican colleagues and I disagree about many things. But on this issue, we have an opportunity to reach not only common ground, but higher ground.

I want to thank the Chairman again for holding these hearings. And I look forward to hearing from all of our esteemed witnesses here today.

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