Dear Chairman Durbin, Ranking Member Grassley, and members of the Committee:

We write on behalf of Law Enforcement Leaders to Reduce Crime & Incarceration, a national coalition of over 200 current and former law enforcement officials from across the political spectrum, dedicated to protecting public safety and reducing unnecessary arrests, prosecutions, and incarceration. We urge you to enact S. 79, the Eliminating a Quantifiably Unjust Application of the Law Act of 2021 (“EQUAL Act”) and S. 1013, the Smarter Sentencing Act of 2021 (“SSA”). The EQUAL Act would eliminate the crack and powder cocaine federal sentencing disparity, which would apply retroactively to allow for resentencing. The SSA, for its part, would lower the applicable federal mandatory minimums in certain narcotics cases and allow federal judges to make individualized sentencing determinations for people charged with nonviolent drug offenses.

Enacted by Congress in 1986, the Anti-Drug Abuse Act established mandatory minimum terms of imprisonment triggered by the possession of specific amounts of cocaine.¹ This law — alongside sentencing guidelines that Congress put forward two years earlier — divested sentencing courts of discretion in narcotics cases, all but assuring substantial prison terms for many defendants who would have otherwise received much lesser penalties.²

But that is not all. Because this legislation concluded, mistakenly, that crack cocaine was scientifically more addictive, and that crack cocaine incited violent behavior, Congress also punished crack-cocaine offenders 100 times more harshly than powder-cocaine offenders.³ In other words, a person convicted of distributing five grams of crack would receive a mandatory minimum of five years imprisonment, while a person convicted of distributing 500 grams of powder cocaine — 100 times more cocaine — would receive the exact same sentence.
In the some 30 years since Congress passed these laws, we now know that scant scientific or penological evidence supports the 100:1 ratio; crack cocaine is no more addictive nor more likely to incite violence than powder cocaine. Although the Fair Sentencing Act of 2010 reduced the sentencing disparity between crack and powder cocaine from 100:1 to 18:1, and despite the First Step Act of 2018 making the 18:1 sentencing reduction retroactively applicable, Congress must once and for all end this sentencing disparity and attempt to unwind the damage wrought by earlier laws, and it can do so by passing the EQUAL Act.

Similarly, the SSA is rooted in the understanding that lengthy sentences, often triggered by mandatory minimums, do not necessarily promote public safety. In 2016, drug trafficking crimes accounted for 67 percent of all federal offenses carrying a mandatory minimum. The average sentence length for individuals facing a mandatory minimum due to drug-related crimes was over 10 years, significantly longer than the average sentence of three years for drug offenders convicted of offenses that do not carry mandatory minimums. These overly-punitive responses to nonviolent drug crimes do little to promote public safety or reduce drug trafficking. For example, research has shown that mandatory minimums in cocaine cases are not effective at reducing cocaine use or drug-related crimes. Additionally, laws that trigger lengthy prison terms are costly, with the federal government spending, on average, nearly $40,000 to incarcerate one person per year.

Critically, both bills also offer Congress an opportunity to reduce the racial disparities caused by many of our federal drug sentencing laws. Crack-cocaine sentencing laws, addressed by the EQUAL Act, have had particularly severe consequences for Black Americans. While comprising less than a third of people convicted of powder cocaine trafficking, Black Americans made up nearly 81 percent of those convicted of crack cocaine-related crimes in 2019. Despite crack and powder cocaine being nearly identical chemically, Black Americans were, and continue to be, disproportionately subjected to the more severe penalties associated with crack cocaine offenses. Similarly, the burdens associated with mandatory minimum sentences, which the SSA seeks to reduce, are not experienced equally. While comprising less than 32 percent of the U.S. population, Black and Hispanic individuals comprise over 70 percent of those convicted of federal offenses with a mandatory minimum. Together, these federal drug sentencing policies have devastated communities of color, disrupting families and draining neighborhoods of resources.

For the reasons herein, we respectfully urge the Senate Committee on the Judiciary to pass the EQUAL and Smarter Sentencing Acts. If passed, both bills will improve the federal sentencing scheme in drug cases without jeopardizing public safety.

Respectfully yours,

Ronal W. Serpas, Ph.D.
Executive Director
Law Enforcement Leaders to Reduce Crime & Incarceration
Former Police Superintendent
New Orleans, Louisiana

Hassan Aden
Federal Consent Decree Monitor
Cleveland, Ohio and Baltimore, Maryland
Former Executive Fellow
Police Foundation
Former Police Chief
Greenville, North Carolina

Eric M. Atkinson
Police Chief
Menomonie, Wisconsin

James Baker
Commissioner
Vermont Department of Corrections

Jean Peters Baker
County Prosecutor
Jackson County, Missouri

Bill Bratton
Former Police Commissioner
New York, New York
Former Police Chief
Los Angeles, California
Former Police Commissioner
Boston, Massachusetts

Kenton Buckner
Police Chief
Syracuse, New York
Former Police Chief
Little Rock, Arkansas

James Bueermann
Former President
Police Foundation
Former Police Chief
Redlands, California
Zachary Carter
Former Corporation Counsel
New York City, New York
Former U.S. Attorney
Eastern District of New York

Kami Chavis
Former Assistant U.S. Attorney
District of Columbia

John Chisholm
District Attorney
Milwaukee County, Wisconsin

John Choi
County Attorney
Ramsey County, Minnesota

Steve Conrad
Former Police Chief
Louisville, Kentucky

Brendan Cox
Director of Policing Strategies
LEAD National Support Bureau
Former Police Chief
Albany, New York

Richard H. Deane, Jr.
Former President
National Association of Former United States Attorneys
Former U.S. Attorney
Northern District of Georgia

W. Thomas Dillard
Former U.S. Attorney
Eastern District of Tennessee

Michael O. Freeman
County Attorney
Hennepin County, Minnesota

Douglas Gansler
Former Attorney General
Maryland
Former State’s Attorney
Montgomery County, Maryland
Barry Grissom
Former U.S. Attorney
District of Kansas

Gregory Hamilton
Former Sheriff
Travis County, Texas

Ronald Hampton
Former Chair
National Black Police Association
Former Executive Director
National Black Police Association

Hal Hardin
Board of Directors Member
National Association of Former United States Attorneys
Former U.S. Attorney
Middle District of Tennessee

Brent D. Harris
City Prosecutor
Flagstaff, Arizona

Janéé Harteau
Former Police Chief
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Walter Holton
Former U.S. Attorney
Middle District of North Carolina

John Hummel
District Attorney
Deschutes County, Oregon

Joseph Jaffe
Former District Attorney
Sullivan County, New York

Chris Magnus
Police Chief
Tucson, Arizona
Former Police Chief
Richmond, California
Beth McCann  
District Attorney  
Denver, Colorado

Risco Mention-Lewis  
Deputy Police Commissioner  
Suffolk County, New York

Joel Merry  
Sheriff  
Sagadahoc County, Maine  
Former President  
Maine Sheriffs Association

Peter Newsham  
Police Chief  
Prince William, Virginia  
Former Police Chief  
Washington, District of Columbia

Matthew D. Orwig  
Former U.S. Attorney  
Eastern District of Texas

Kathleen O'Toole  
Former Police Chief  
Seattle, Washington  
Former Police Commissioner  
Boston, Massachusetts

Angela Pacheco  
Former District Attorney  
Santa Fe, Rio Arriba, and Los Alamos Counties  
New Mexico

Melba Pearson  
Former President  
National Black Prosecutors Association  
Former Assistant State Attorney  
Miami-Dade County, Florida

Andrew P. Peralta  
Former President  
National Latino Peace Officers Association  
Former Corrections Captain (LVMPD)  
Las Vegas, Nevada
Brad Pigott  
Former U.S. Attorney  
Southern District of Mississippi

Richard J. Pocker  
Former U.S. Attorney  
District of Nevada

Karl A. Racine  
Attorney General  
Washington, District of Columbia

Rick Raemisch  
Former Executive Director  
Colorado Department of Corrections  
Former Sheriff  
Dane County, Wisconsin

Charles H. Ramsey  
Former Police Commissioner  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Gary Raney  
Former Sheriff  
Ada County, Idaho

Richard Rossman  
Executive Director  
National Association of Former United States Attorneys  
Former U.S. Attorney  
Eastern District of Michigan

Richard Stanek  
Former President  
Major County Sheriffs' Association  
Former Sheriff  
Hennepin County, Minnesota

Darrel Stephens  
Former Executive Director  
Major Cities Chiefs Association  
Former Police Chief  
Charlotte Mecklenburg, North Carolina
Donald K. Stern  
Former President  
National Association of Former United States Attorneys  
Former U.S. Attorney  
District of Massachusetts

Gregory A. Thomas  
Senior Executive for Law Enforcement Operations  
Office of the District Attorney  
Kings County, New York  
Former President  
National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives

Cyrus Vance, Jr.  
District Attorney  
New York County, New York

John Walsh  
Former U.S. Attorney  
District of Colorado  
Former Chair  
Attorney General's Advisory Committee

John E. Wetzel  
Secretary of Corrections  
Department of Corrections, Pennsylvania

Stephen Zappala, Jr.  
District Attorney  
Allegheny County, Pennsylvania

7 United States Sentencing Commission, supra note 6.


