

A Federal Agenda to Reduce Crime and Unnecessary Incarceration

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Four priorities Congress can pass this year that will improve public safety, accountability, and fairness.

Introduction

Law Enforcement Leaders to Reduce Crime & Incarceration (LEL), which was formed in 2015, brings together approximately 200 current and former police chiefs, sheriffs, federal and state chief prosecutors, attorneys general, and corrections officials from across the country who are committed to supporting practical, tested policies that reduce unnecessary incarceration.

Our members have multiple decades of law enforcement experience between them. Based on that collective experience, we believe that the goals of reducing crime and reducing incarceration are not only compatible but are also mutually necessary. Unnecessary incarceration is counter-productive. It can create more crime, waste taxpayer dollars, and further divide law enforcement from their communities. We also believe that we must act swiftly and with a laser focus to interdict, reduce, and respond to violent crime.

These principles have guided our [support](#) for legislation such as the [First Step Act](#), which was signed into law by President Trump in 2018. Among other things, this law shortened sentences for certain nonviolent federal crimes and expanded job training, access to mental health and substance use treatment and other programs for people who are incarcerated. The law has been remarkably successful. The [recidivism rate](#) for people released under the First Step Act is less than 10 percent, compared to more than 40 percent for people generally released from federal custody. This success rate demonstrates that the First Step Act's approach of reducing unnecessary incarceration, improving accountability, and increasing rehabilitation opportunities can help to make us all safer. Moreover, reducing unnecessary incarceration not only favorably impacts our communities, it also allows more time and resources to combat violent crime.

Today, law enforcement is facing many challenges. These include [staffing shortages](#) across sectors, [eroding public trust](#) in

institutions, [overcrowding](#) in prisons, and [continuing concerns](#) about crime and disorder. Police, sheriffs, prosecutors, and corrections have increasingly become [default responses](#) to public health needs, homelessness, mental illness, and substance use, even though they are not always the best response to these challenges, further straining resources.

To address these urgent issues, we highlight four reforms that Congress should prioritize this year. Each has had support from both Republicans and Democrats. They will help to advance fairness and accountability, improve law enforcement efficiency, build trust in government, and ensure the safety and well-being of our communities.

Improving Clearance Rates for Violent Crimes

Despite a [national decline](#) in crime, clearance rates for serious offenses remain low. From [2019 to 2022](#), murder clearance rates dropped from 61 percent to 53 percent and violent crime clearance rates decreased from 46 percent to 36.7 percent, impacting rural and urban communities alike. According to FBI data, [only about half](#) the murders committed in the US were solved in 2022, following a decades-long trend of consistently falling clearance rates for homicides and violent crime nationwide.

The research is clear that increasing the certainty of getting caught is one of the [most effective ways](#) to deter crime. Low clearance rates for violent crime undermine justice for victims, erode public trust in law enforcement, embolden potential offenders, [disproportionately impact](#) marginalized communities, and hinder crime prevention efforts.

The [Violent Incident Clearance and Technological Investigative Methods \(VICTIM\) Act](#), which has [bipartisan](#) support, aims to address these issues by establishing a grant program at the Department of Justice to help state, tribal, and local law enforcement agencies solve more crimes and improve clearance rates for homicides and firearm-related violent crimes. The bill would provide: resources to expand investigative capacity;

funding for hiring, training, and retaining law enforcement personnel and forensic specialists; upgrades to evidence-processing technology and forensic equipment; best practices for improving clearance rates; and expanded services to victims and family members, including mental health resources and assistance with shelter, wages, and relocation costs.

This bill will help to strengthen deterrence, hold perpetrators accountable, and improve public safety while also restoring public confidence in the rule of law.

Expanding Healthcare Access in Jail and Prison

Medicaid funds cannot currently be used to cover healthcare costs in jails and state prisons, even pre-trial. This rule, known as the [“Medicaid inmate exclusion policy,”](#) disrupts continuity of care, with potentially severe consequences for an incarcerated population that is [disproportionately impacted](#) by health conditions. This disruption can be deadly for the [roughly 60 percent](#) of people who are incarcerated with a substance use disorder, increasing their already high risk of overdose after leaving jail or prison. The policy also deeply impacts [approximately half](#) the people in US jails and over one-third of the people in prisons that have been diagnosed with a mental illness. By reducing the availability of treatment and recovery, this becomes an obstacle to successful reentry, leading to increased recidivism.

Two [bipartisan bills](#) introduced in the previous session of Congress would streamline healthcare access for incarcerated people, leading to better health and safety outcomes. The [Due Process Continuity of Care Act](#) would allow people in pretrial detention to continue receiving substance use treatment through Medicaid, reducing the risk of a healthcare coverage gap and resulting harmful outcomes. Similarly, the [Reentry Act](#) would allow for Medicaid coverage to begin 30 days before an incarcerated person is released into the community. With [data](#) showing people released from prison are 129 times more likely to die of a drug overdose

during the first two weeks after release, it can potentially save lives.

Taken together, these bills will improve health outcomes for individuals leaving prison, reduce recidivism linked to untreated mental health and substance use disorders, and [save](#) taxpayers money.

Ensuring Incarcerated People Are Prepared for Successful Reentry

Up to [48 percent of people](#) leaving federal prison lack essential identification documents, like Social Security cards, birth certificates, and state IDs. This hinders their ability to secure housing, employment, and healthcare after leaving prison, greatly increasing the odds of recidivism. One [study](#) found, for example, that stable employment after incarceration reduces recidivism even for those with extensive criminal histories and no meaningful connection to the labor market before entering prison.

While the federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) has a [process to assist](#) people with obtaining identification, there are inherent logistical and financial challenges, such as fees for documents and in-person application requirements. There is also [no guarantee](#) the IDs people are able to obtain will be accepted by federal agencies or meet the requirements to access federal benefits.

The [bipartisan BOP Release Card ID Act](#) would address these issues by requiring the BOP to provide critical identification documents to people exiting federal prison that are accepted by federal agencies, such as the Social Security Administration, the Department of Veterans' Affairs, and more. This would ensure that people leaving federal prison have fewer barriers to reentry and thus a lower risk of recidivism.

Funding Prison Oversight to Ensure Accountability

The [Federal Prison Oversight Act](#) was signed into law in 2024 with overwhelming [bipartisan](#)

[support](#) in Congress. It was also supported by both [incarcerated individuals](#) and [corrections officers](#), and was passed after [significant violent incidents](#) at several federal prisons that put the safety of both incarcerated people and corrections officers at risk.

To improve accountability and oversight, the law establishes an ombudsman to investigate complaints from corrections staff and those who are incarcerated in federal prisons. It also grants the Department of Justice's Inspector General the authority to conduct comprehensive risk-based inspections of all 122 federal prison facilities. However, without sufficient funding for the training, staffing, and investigative resources that it requires, the legislation will not provide the transparency and accountability it promises. Full funding will ensure federal prisons operate effectively and safely, address systemic issues, and help lawmakers make informed decisions on policy, resources, and reforms. Congress should prioritize fully funding this legislation this year.

As law enforcement leaders, we know that building trust in the justice system and creating safer, healthier communities requires collaborative work to achieve multiple objectives. Our key goals include reducing the scope of our criminal justice system, using proven strategies to prevent crime and improve investigations, expanding treatment, ensuring accountability, breaking cycles of recidivism, and investing in better training and well-being for police, prosecutors, and corrections staff. The above bipartisan federal legislative priorities will help advance these goals.