

April 16, 2014

As faith organizations and religious leaders, we are committed to bettering the lives and realizing the human potential of society's most vulnerable individuals and communities. More and more, this means addressing the consequences of mass incarceration and preventing those to come – and thus healing the many wounds of our nation's misguided war on drugs.

When it comes to drugs, we should focus on the goals we agree on: protecting our kids, protecting public safety, and preventing and treating drug abuse and addiction. We join together to ask you to repeal policies that unnecessarily criminalize millions of people and place a vastly disproportionate burden on poor and black communities – and to replace those policies with just, effective and evidence-based approaches.

The United States imprisons more people than any other nation in the world – thanks in large part to the war on drugs. In 2012, there were more than 1.5 million drug arrests in the U.S., the vast majority for mere possession. The destructive effects of mass criminalization on communities across the country – particularly communities of color – cannot be overstated.

Approximately 2.7 million children are growing up in American homes where one or more parents are incarcerated. One in nine black children has a parent behind bars. Two-thirds of these parents are incarcerated for nonviolent offenses, primarily drug law violations.

And the cycle of punishment does not stop after incarceration ends. The effects of a conviction roll on and on – including the denial of child custody, voting rights, employment, business loans, trade licensing, student aid and other forms of public assistance. Criminal records are also used as a basis to deport legal residents and to bar other noncitizens from visiting the U.S. Through these draconian policies, we have created a permanent under-class of millions of Americans – with major implications for American democracy. More than 5.5 million people are disenfranchised due to a criminal record – including nearly 1 in 13 black people of voting age.

We urge you to re-evaluate our current policies and call for the repeal of these counterproductive laws. Guided by principles of compassion, justice and fairness, we make the following recommendations:

1. Repeal laws that criminalize drug possession and replace them with policies that expand access to effective health approaches to drug use, including evidence-based drug treatment.
2. Eliminate policies that result in racially disproportionate arrest and incarceration rates.
3. End policies that unjustly exclude people with a record of arrest or conviction from key rights and opportunities.

Despite our diversity, we are guided by our religious principles to serve those in need and give voice to those who have been marginalized and stigmatized by unjust policies. We cannot sit silently while a misguided war is waged on entire communities, ostensibly under the guise of combating the very real harms of drug abuse. The war on drugs has become a costly, ineffective and unjust failure. Our people deserve better.

We urge, in the strongest terms, a complete rethinking of U.S. drug policies – and we believe the recommendations outlined in this letter are a good place to start the conversation.

This Easter Sunday, and in light of our current realities, we, leaders of faith call for a rebirth and resurrection of communities burdened by the harms of injustice oftentimes masquerading under of the guise of law and order and criminal justice.