

Why should you support the #SentencingReform and corrections Act of 2015?

By [Drew G. I. Hart](#)

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Today I'm in Washington D.C., but will only be there for today and tomorrow. I'm here as part of a larger effort to urge our government representatives to support S. 2123, the Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act of 2015. This bill would bring meaningful reforms to the overwhelming problem of mass incarceration that plagues our society. Without fail, when I go and speak to local churches, conferences, and colleges about race/racism, you can expect that at some point I will address the criminalization of poor black and brown people for nonviolent drug offenses, creating a caste system in our judicial and prison system, as well as in the broader society. What frequently results in only a slap on the wrist, if not something completely overlooked when a white youth breaks drug laws, often has long term devastating consequences for black and brown youth breaking the exact same drug laws. Though this has been an issue for a long time, and many scholars and activists have written and spoken on it for quite a while, the movement responding to these problems have found new momentum in congruency with Michelle Alexander's mainstream treatment of the subject in her book *The New Jim Crow*.^[1]

I won't bother repeat her analysis here, or that of others. Nor my own personal experience and observation, having seen family and friends caught up by the forces of black and brown criminalization, and pulled in by the prison industrial complex. However, if you haven't read on the subject before, stop what you are doing and either go to the library or bookstore and start reading. Michelle Alexander's book is a helpful and easy starting point. If you are ready to go deeper, consider exploring prison abolishment resources from scholar activists like Angela Davis who have been writing and speaking on this subject for quite a while, or dive into theological frameworks for thinking about our prison industrial complex beyond punitive goals and towards a restorative justice lens in line with Jesus-shaped faith and commitments, which can be found in James Logan's *Good Punishment?*.^[2]

from www.sentencingproject.org

This bill, however, will not undo all the problems, concerns, and issues raised by these authors, nor will it satisfy my own personal conscience in response to these overwhelming realities. Yet, as much as I believe the whole prison and judicial system is broken and needs a complete overhaul, I am simultaneously glad to see the possibility of significant reform being implemented which will bring concrete changes that will reduce the injustice and suffering that flows uninhibited from our systems that claim to be fair, equal, and just. The Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act of 2015 will do just that.

Here are a few highlights of the S. 2123 Bill:

- It will reduce some mandatory minimum sentences for nonviolent offenses, and would make the changes retroactive.
- Reform enhanced mandatory minimums for people with drug convictions. This means it would eliminate three strike rules that impose mandatory life sentences for people involved in petty and nonviolent drug offenses, and would only apply to more violent and dangerous felonies.
- The law also allows judges to use personal discretion in sentencing people below mandatory minimums based on the actual situation and severity of the infraction.
- The Department of Justice will also be responsible for creating risk assessments of all federal inmates, which will provide greater opportunity for people to take advantage of early release, work and education programs, drug rehabilitation, religious training, and hopefully spend more time in a half-way house than

behind bars.

- Also, the bill has significant reforms concerning the well-being of juveniles. It limits the usage of solitary confinement on juveniles, it eliminates life sentences, and creates an opportunity for some juveniles that have served over 20 years to petition for early release.

These are just a few of the features in S. 2123. Again, the bill is not perfect, and a racialized mass incarceration system will not go away if this bill is accepted. It is important to emphasize that. This is just one step in the right direction. Much more work needs to be done. I encourage you to look at S. 2123 yourself, and see some of the other reforms and changes that are included. Not all of it is related to drug offenses. The good news is that this bill was created through bipartisan support. And from my own experience of speaking to white, black, brown, urban and suburban Christian communities, once people are aware of the racially differentiated experiences through mass incarceration and its ballooning to around 2 million inmates from around 300,000 four decades prior, then their stance becomes clear. They must stand with those being crushed by unjust systems that disproportionately oppress communities of color and/or in poverty. Change is possible, and the time is now to pursue it.

Though most of the American churches in the past failed to be a people that manifested the kingdom of God in society during racialized chattel slavery, as well as during Jim Crow white supremacy, we have the opportunity to repent and live into a new and more Jesus-shaped story, being a people that do what God requires; doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly before our God. (Micah 6:8)

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[1] Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York, N.Y.; Jackson, Tenn.: New Press; Distributed by Perseus Distribution, 2012).

[2] James Samuel. Logan, *Good Punishment?: Christian Moral Practice and U.S. Imprisonment* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2008).