

November 17, 2015

The Honorable Robert Goodlatte  
Chairman  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Committee on the Judiciary  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable John Conyers, Jr.  
Ranking Member  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Committee on the Judiciary  
Washington, DC 20510

**Re: Supporting H.R. 3713, the Sentencing Reform Act of 2015**

Dear Chairman Goodlatte and Ranking Member Conyers,

On behalf of the twenty-three (23) undersigned organizations, representing faith, criminal justice, civil and human rights organizations and unions, we wish to express our support for H.R. 3713, the Sentencing Reform Act of 2015 (SRA) in its present form. Our country faces complex, systemic issues regarding our current sentencing laws and our criminal justice system as a whole. This legislation would be an important first step to addressing some of the problems in the federal system and we hope it will serve as a launching pad for other necessary reforms in the future. We urge members of the House Judiciary Committee to vote yes in support of this legislation in its current form.

Today, almost one in one hundred American adults is incarcerated. America's prison population, which has increased by five hundred percent over the past thirty years, is the largest in the world.<sup>1</sup> Mass incarceration has affected individuals and families across the nation, but has had a markedly disproportionate impact on communities of color. The Federal Bureau of Prisons reports that thirty-seven percent of its current prison population is African American<sup>2</sup> and that thirty-four percent is Latino.<sup>3</sup> These appalling numbers are the legacy of the misguided and overly punitive sentencing policies that were instituted beginning in the 1980s and 90s. Comprehensive criminal justice and sentencing reform is needed to address these systemic problems and inequities affecting American citizens and society. This bill offers the chance to begin making meaningful changes and moving towards a system that truly ensures equal justice for all.

Decades of evidence and experience tell us that harsh sentencing regimes have done much more harm than good. The strict penalties designed to combat the distribution of illegal drugs did little to stem the drug trade, and swept low-level non-violent drug offenders into our ever-expanding criminal justice system. Furthermore, mandatory minimums have applied to minority defendants at a staggeringly disproportionate rate. Over the past several years, the U.S. Sentencing Commission has reported that about seventy percent of mandatory minimums are imposed on African American and Latino individuals.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.sentencingproject.org/template/page.cfm?id=107>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.bop.gov/about/statistics/statistics\\_inmate\\_race.jsp](https://www.bop.gov/about/statistics/statistics_inmate_race.jsp)

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.bop.gov/about/statistics/statistics\\_inmate\\_ethnicity.jsp](https://www.bop.gov/about/statistics/statistics_inmate_ethnicity.jsp)

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/research-and-publications/quick-facts/Quick\\_Facts\\_Mand\\_Mins\\_FY14.pdf](http://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/research-and-publications/quick-facts/Quick_Facts_Mand_Mins_FY14.pdf)

This bill would reform the federal sentencing system by making several positive changes to the practice of mandatory minimum sentences. The “three-strikes” penalty which mandates life sentences for certain individuals would be reduced to a term of twenty-five years. A similar provision which mandates twenty year sentences for certain individuals would be reduced to fifteen. Judges would have more discretion to sentence below prescribed mandatory minimums by the expansion of the existing “safety valve” and the creation of a new authority for judges to depart from certain mandatory minimums. These measures work towards ensuring that strict mandatory minimums are not imposed on individuals who have limited criminal history and whose alleged conduct was not the sort envisioned by these strict penalties. These reforms to the federal mandatory minimum sentencing scheme represent an acknowledgement that current draconian sentencing approaches have failed.

Some of those who have been subjected to excessive sentences would receive relief under the bill as well. Individuals who were given life sentences under the old “three strikes” penalties would be allowed to petition a judge for redress. Similarly, the reforms instituted by the Fair Sentencing Act that reduced the disparity between individuals convicted of offenses involving crack cocaine versus powdered cocaine would be made retroactive in this bill. With these reforms many more individuals who had no hope of leaving prison would be given release dates and could look forward to returning home and rejoining their families and communities. Retroactivity would not result in immediate release. A person must go before a judge to determine whether or not he or she would be eligible for retroactive resentencing.

We commend the Chairman, Ranking Member, and the other co-sponsors for their leadership and hard work towards addressing harsh sentencing and the harms it causes to individuals, families, and communities. The bipartisan effort of the past several months should serve as a model for further efforts to solve the problems that have become pervasive in America’s justice system. We urge members of the House Judiciary Committee to vote in favor of this bill and to join its sponsors in their laudable efforts towards guaranteeing a fairer criminal justice system for all.

Sincerely,

Aleph Institute  
Alliance of Baptists  
American Civil Liberties Union  
Bend the Arc  
Church of Scientology National Affairs Office  
Church of the Brethren, Office of Public Witness  
Drug Policy Alliance  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America  
FedCURE  
Global Justice Institute  
Justice Strategies  
Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights  
Life for Pot  
Mennonite Central Committee, U.S. Washington Office  
Metropolitan Community Churches  
National African American Drug Policy Coalition, Inc.

National Center for Lesbian Rights  
National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs  
StoptheDrugWar.org  
The Sentencing Project  
T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights  
Union for Reform Judaism  
United Methodist Church, General Board of Church and Society

cc: House Judiciary Members