



April 20, 2009

The Honorable James Webb
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Arlen Specter
U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee, Ranking Member
Washington, DC 20510

RE: The Sentencing Project endorses S. 714 - the National Criminal Justice Commission Act of 2009

Dear Senators Webb and Specter:

The Sentencing Project, an organization founded in 1986 and dedicated to the study and improvement of the U.S. criminal and juvenile justice systems, applauds your leadership and commitment to advancing a fairer and more effective system of justice. We are pleased to endorse **S. 714, the National Criminal Justice Commission Act of 2009**.

S. 714 would create a commission to conduct a thorough evaluation of the nation's justice system and offer recommendations for reform in a range of areas, including sentencing policy, rates of incarceration, law enforcement, crime prevention, substance abuse and mental health treatment, corrections and reentry. The establishment of such a commission could not come at a more critical time. With 2.3 million people in prisons and jails, the United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world. Federal and state governments spend more than \$50 billion each year on corrections, and the population behind bars continues to grow.

The Sentencing Project shares your concerns about the overly punitive approaches to non-violent and low-level offenses that have overcrowded U.S. prisons and jails. Too often men, women and youth suffering from drug addiction and/or mental illness find themselves incarcerated because of inadequate levels of community-based services. Moreover, the lengthening of terms of incarceration for low-level, particularly drug, offenses has contributed to an unprecedented prison and jail population. From a figure of about 40,000 people incarcerated for a drug offense in 1980, there has since been an 1100% increase to a total of 500,000 today. To place some perspective on that change, the number of people incarcerated for a drug offense is now greater than the number incarcerated for all offenses in 1980.

This investment in the pursuit, prosecution and sentencing of low-level offenses has strained resources at all levels of government and distracted law enforcement from focusing on more substantial criminal activity. A new approach to crime prevention is necessary and the time for reform is upon us.

The commission created by this legislation would establish an organized and proactive approach to studying and advancing programs and policies that promote public safety, while overhauling those practices that are found to be fundamentally flawed.

The Sentencing Project believes it is time to address the problems in the criminal and juvenile justice systems. We strongly urge passage of the National Criminal Justice Commission Act of 2009.

Sincerely,

Marc Mauer

Cc: Senate Judiciary Committee and Senators Bingaman, Brown, Burris, Gillibrand, Hagan, Kennedy, Landrieu, McCaskill, Murray, Reid and Warner