



CRIMINAL JUSTICE REFORM

INTRODUCTION

In 2016, the Wisconsin Legislature convened a special study committee to review the most effective means of reducing ex-offender recidivism and remove impediments to ex-offender employment. The Wisconsin Catholic Conference (WCC) welcomes this bi-partisan effort to reduce unnecessary incarcerations and to help returning citizens build productive lives. In addition, the WCC continues to back efforts to divert nonviolent offenders from going to prison in the first place. In particular, the WCC supports continued expansion of the existing Treatment Alternatives and Diversions (TAD) program and the return of first time, nonviolent 17-year-old offenders to the juvenile justice system.

CHURCH TEACHING

In their 2000 statement, *Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice*, the bishops of the United States outlined what they described as the “paradoxical Catholic teaching on crime and punishment”:

We will not tolerate the crime and violence that threatens the lives and dignity of our sisters and brothers, and we will not give up on those who have lost their way. We seek both justice and mercy. Working together, we believe our faith calls us to protect public safety, promote the common good, and restore community. We believe a Catholic ethic of responsibility, rehabilitation, and restoration can become the foundation for the necessary reform of our broken criminal justice system.

Speaking to prisoners in Mexico, Pope Francis reminds us that “prisons are an indication of the kind of society we live in. In many cases they are a sign of the silence and omissions which have led to a throwaway culture, a symptom of a culture that has stopped supporting life, of a society that has little by little abandoned its children.” The Pope calls on all Christians and people of good will to “promote a culture which acts and seeks to prevent those situations and pathways that end in damaging and impairing the social fabric.” (*Address at Centre for Social Adjustment No. 3*, Ciudad Juárez, February 17, 2016).

WCC POSITIONS

Reduce Recidivism and Remove Impediments to Employment. The 2016 Study Committee produced a report outlining 11 recommendations for improving reentry programs, job training, and health care and human services enrollment; providing State of Wisconsin identification cards and medication supplies; and investigating the benefits to the correctional system of trauma-informed care models. The key to successfully adopting these recommendations lies with all three branches of government. The WCC strongly urges the Legislature, Governor, and the Wisconsin Department of Justice (DOJ) to fully implement the Study Committee’s recommendations.

Treatment Alternatives and Diversions (TAD) Program. Since 2007, the Wisconsin DOJ’s TAD Program has funded 46 county and two tribal projects around the state that divert first time, nonviolent

offenders with underlying substance abuse problems from going to jail or prison. In calendar year 2017, TAD spending stood at over \$6 million. TAD not only reduces incarceration rates, it also saves money. For every \$1 invested in TAD, the state saves \$1.93 through averted incarceration and reduced crime.

Despite the measurable success of the TAD Program, the need for greater funding is urgent. The WCC joins other faith-based and criminal justice advocates in asking for a significant increase in TAD funding so that more counties can establish their own projects. In addition, the WCC urges the Legislature to ensure that sufficient high-quality treatment programs are available statewide, so that every offender who qualifies for treatment can receive timely and effective services.

Juvenile Justice. For over 20 years, Wisconsin has mandated that all 17-year-old offenders be adjudicated in the adult system. Today, however, there is a collective acknowledgment among medical professionals, corrections officials, social scientists, and legislators across the political spectrum that 17-year-olds belong in the juvenile justice system, particularly those who are first time, nonviolent offenders. Because the adolescent brain is still being formed, the age appropriate programming found in the juvenile system is the best way to rehabilitate a young offender and reduce recidivism. Furthermore, adolescents in the juvenile system continue their high school education, whether in their own communities or in a detention center. This leaves them far better equipped to reenter society than those who languish in adult institutions. Finally, adolescents are far more likely to reoffend, be victimized, or attempt suicide when they are housed in adult institutions.

Past efforts to return first time, nonviolent 17-year-old offenders to the juvenile justice system have received broad bi-partisan support, but ultimately failed to pass due to fiscal constraints. While the cost of detaining adult prisoners falls on the state, the cost of detaining most juvenile offenders falls on local government. Recognizing these fiscal challenges, the WCC joins other advocates in urging the Legislature to ensure that the funding necessary to return first time, nonviolent 17-year-old offenders is properly allocated to the juvenile system.

ACTION REQUESTED

Please contact your legislators and urge them to:

1. Invest in evidence-based strategies to reduce recidivism and help returning citizens find and maintain stable employment, housing, and health care.
2. Increase funding for the TAD Program and ensure that sufficient high-quality treatment programs are available statewide.
3. Find the funds necessary to return first time, nonviolent 17-year-old offenders to the juvenile justice system.

For more information, please contact Barbara Sella at 608/257-0004.

To contact your State Senator or Representative, visit the Wisconsin State Legislature website at <http://legis.wisconsin.gov> and click on "Find My Legislators," or call the State Legislative Hotline, 1-800-362-9472.