



High Imprisonment Rate: A Problem We Can't Ignore

Business Groups Outline Four Principles for
Criminal Justice Reform in Louisiana

Louisiana has the highest imprisonment rate in the country, not exactly a "first in the nation" distinction we should aspire to hold. Currently, 816 out of every 100,000 Louisianans are behind bars. That's nearly double the national average and a more than four-fold increase since the late 1970's.

Perhaps surprisingly, we aren't locking up more people because of higher crime rates. In fact, Louisiana's crime rate has fallen since the mid 1990's and is comparable to peer states in the Southeast who incarcerate significantly fewer people per capita.

The state spends nearly \$20,000 annually for each person behind bars – more than \$700 million per year in total on corrections – but isn't getting a good return on investment. One of every three people released from prison ends up back behind bars within three years. The state's highest-in-the-nation imprisonment rate, hefty price tag, and poor outcomes add up to a problem which business leaders can't afford to ignore.

Given Louisiana's budget pressures and workforce needs, continuing along the same path is unsustainable. It's time to take a hard look at the criminal justice system and make smarter choices about who we lock up and for how long. That's why business community leaders from across the state applaud the formation of the Justice Reinvestment Task Force.

As the bipartisan, inter-branch Justice Reinvestment Task Force digs deeper into the causes of our prison population growth and begins identifying policy recommendations, we, the leaders of chambers of commerce, business organizations and economic development groups from across Louisiana, hope they will keep four key principles front of mind:

- 1. Strengthen Public Safety:** Businesses thrive in safe communities. The primary goals of the criminal justice system are to reduce crime, hold offenders accountable and keep citizens safe. Reforms to the system must keep those goals at the forefront and increase public safety.
- 2. Only Evidence-Based Solutions:** Anecdotes aren't good enough. Policy decisions must be driven by data and carefully weigh risk and rehabilitation. We should consider safe alternatives to prison and implement programs proven to reduce the likelihood of committing new crimes and increase the likelihood of future employment.
- 3. Link Spending with Outcomes:** Corrections is a necessary part of the state budget, but prison populations and costs can't continue on autopilot. Instead we must seek ways to reduce the overall prison population, decrease costs and invest savings in programs proven to change criminal behavior and thinking.
- 4. Invest in Employability to Address Workforce Needs:** For many companies in the state, finding qualified workers is a major challenge. With the right treatment and training, former offenders can find well-paying jobs. Corrections reforms should include career training and programs to address critical employability skills to increase opportunities for those supervised in the community and those coming out of prison and increase available workforce for Louisiana businesses.



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