

Q & A From the Frontlines of Georgia's Criminal Justice Reform with Eric Cochling of the Georgia Center for Opportunity

Q: When were Georgia's reforms initially implemented and what were they?

Criminal justice reform began in Georgia in 2012, with the Governor making a push for front-end reforms to, essentially, keep non-violent offenders who commit low-level property and drug crimes out of prison. Georgia House Bill (HB1176) placed these reforms into law. In 2012, conservative leaders and other groups began to also press for reforms to the backend of the system related to reentry to help address the many issues that were preventing successful reentry and driving recidivism.

Q: What are the results of those reforms?

The reforms above have been documented by the state of Georgia [here](#) but here are two highlights:

- Saved the state more than \$264 million since 2012 (in housing inmates, building new facilities, etc.).
- While official recidivism numbers are not available until the end of 2018, it's estimated that the rate has dropped by about 10 percent.

Q: What was the public's reaction to reforms when they were first discussed compared to now?

Governor Deal was smart to focus on the cost of our system and the fact that Georgia locked up too many individuals and made it incredibly difficult for an ex-offender to get back on their feet after release. Given the level of incarceration and criminal justice supervision in Georgia (about 500,000 people are under some form of criminal supervision here), the public was also aware of the need to reform the system because most of us have had a relative impacted by it. Much like in Louisiana, it is important to note that the Governor wisely used a reform commission to vet and recommend reforms, in part to provide the public forum for debating reform ideas and developing buy-in.

Q: While many leading conservatives have now embraced Louisiana's reforms, there has been push back from some traditional conservatives who believe reforms will be counterproductive. How did you bring skeptics around in Georgia?

Louisiana is in a very similar place to where Georgia was relative to spending on incarceration and supervision and the number of people touched by it. With that in mind, conservatives and others realized the status quo (and the projected growth in the prison system) is untenable and reform must be tackled. Also, once someone has served their time, they have paid their debt to society and shouldn't continue to face penalties that prevent them from living a decent life. Finally, smart reforms result in a system that is more just, less expensive, AND better able to protect the public by focusing resources on those who are truly a danger to society, while preparing those leaving prison to successfully rejoin the rest of us.

Q: Conservative groups have an obligation to be watchdogs. What advice would you give to conservative Louisianans to assume this role?

There's hardly a better way to insure reforms are done well (meaning, not in a way that harms public safety or fails to appropriately penalize criminal behavior) than driving the policy reform effort. By engaging at the policy and the community level, you have the best opportunity to ensure reforms are done well and to know if they are working. In the process, you will develop relationships and insight that improve your ability to see and address problems in the system - regardless of their nature. To not engage is the surest way to miss out on the chance to leave your imprint on reform.