

*Administration of Barack Obama, 2015*

**Remarks at a White House Screening of the VICE News Documentary "Fixing the System"**

*September 18, 2015*

Hello, everybody! Hello, hello, hello. Everybody, please have a seat, have a seat. Have a seat. Well, I just wanted to stop by—[*laughter*]—and just say thank you, because we have in this audience some people who are doing outstanding work on behalf of criminal justice reform. I want to thank Angie for the introduction. I want to recognize a couple of Members of Congress who are here, who have been great champions of this. Congresswoman Frederica Wilson from the great State of Florida. And a great champion of this issue, he is working tirelessly in the Senate to advance some important legislation, Senator Cory Booker of New Jersey.

We also have former Attorney General and buddy of mine, Eric Holder. I know our current Attorney General I think had to leave a little bit earlier, but obviously is deeply involved in these efforts. I want to thank Shane Smith and everybody at VICE for the great work and efforts that they've made in the production of what you're going to be seeing here today. And then there's a guy named Al Sharpton over here. [*Laughter*] What's up, Al? He's been working on these issues for a while.

America spends \$80 billion a year keeping folks locked up. We represent 5 percent of the world's population, 25 percent of its inmates. That's not an indicator that we want to be the leader in. Keep in mind that I'm the father of two kids, and I care about them being safe, and I am fiercely protective of them. And I think it is important for all of us to recognize that in too many communities, crime destroys lives and hope and opportunity, and we cannot diminish the impact of crime. And I think everybody here recognizes that we have to have a criminal justice system that is effective and that prosecutes individuals in a fair way to ensure that we as a society are able to maintain peace and order and security. That's not something that anybody here would argue against.

But what we also know is that for too many individuals, particularly nonviolent offenders caught up in an environment in which drugs are pervasive and opportunity is lacking, the punishment does not fit the crime.

Too often, prosecutions, arrests are not being applied in a way that reflects our belief in equality under the law. And the effects of this mass incarceration ripple through families and communities, especially communities of color in ways that are not just a problem of the here and now, but continue across generations. So as a society, we have to acknowledge that there is something wrong when we are locking up this many folks with this kind of frequency, concentrated in a handful of communities in cities and towns and counties across this country.

And that's why, in July, I visited the El Reno Federal penitentiary in Oklahoma—the first President, apparently, to have ever visited a prison—because the people in these prisons are deserving of our attention. They're human beings with hopes and dreams, who in many cases have made profound mistakes, but are American citizens nonetheless.

It was interesting, during that visit, we had a chance to meet with corrections officers and wardens and those who manage the system. They have an extremely difficult and often

dangerous job. And we expressed our appreciation for what they do. But they also recognized that we could be doing better in how we administer justice.

And I met with a group of prisoners, and what was striking was the degree to which so many of these young people—and many of them were young; there were some older ones who were there, often because they had been serving time for mistakes they had made during their youth. And I said at the time—I think I—you may hear me say it in this program—that they weren't so different from me. I made mistakes when I was young. I didn't always follow a straight path. The primary difference between me and them was, I had more of a cushion. I had second chances. In some cases, I had resources, or I was in an environment in which when I made a mistake as a teen, that I could recover from it. And these young people didn't have any margin for error.

And that notion that as a consequence of youthful mistakes, they could end up in a lifelong cycle of crime to where the prospect of them being able to recover and reenter society with gainful employment and the ability to be part of their children's lives and to be citizens appeared remote—that the notion that that's how we think our criminal justice system should work, that that should be the end result, there's something un-American about that.

This is a country that believes in second chances. And right now we've got millions of people who aren't getting it. So we've got to make sure that our criminal justice system works. We've got to make sure that our criminal justice system keeps people safe. We have to respect the incredibly difficult job that police officers have and remind ourselves that they are protecting and serving us and they have a right to go home too. We have to recognize that there are prosecutors and judges throughout the system who want to do the right thing and feel compassion and understand the human stories that are involved in this thing, but are bound by laws that all too often have been created because of politics or misguided theories as opposed to being based on the evidence and what's required to keep people safe.

The bottom line is, we've got to make sure that our criminal justice system does not perpetuate a cycle of hopelessness, but rather lifts people up. And there's no contradiction between us being concerned and vigilant when it comes to keeping our streets safe and our children safe and also making sure that our system is fair and just and does not consign an entire class of people to a life on the margins.

And that means that we've got to support sentencing reform efforts, like the one that these Members of Congress are supporting, so that we can more effectively use our resources to protect the public. It means that we have to stay focused on prevention programs and alternatives like drug courts that can intercede with young people before they're locked into a path from which they cannot recover. It means that providing education and job training and focus inside of prisons is not being soft on crime; it is being smart about what is needed in order to make sure that people can recover from their mistakes.

And the good news is that people from Federal, State, and local governments, from law enforcement and the judiciary, from business and entertainment, and local communities are finding common ground on this issue. What's encouraging is, this is one of the few areas where we're seeing some really important bipartisan conversations taking place and members of the faith community stepping up alongside civil rights advocates in really significant and meaningful ways. And so I'm encouraged by it.

You represent the possibilities of shaping a coalition that makes this aspect of America more consistent with our ideals and our values. And for your extraordinary work, I want to

thank you. But recognize this is going to be hard work. It is not going to be easy. It is not going to happen soon. We are just going to have to keep on pushing at the Federal level, but also at the State and local levels. We've got a great Attorney General currently, and we had a previous Attorney General who cared deeply about this.

But we need States attorneys and local prosecutors, and sheriffs, and departments all across this country to internalize these issues as well, because the Federal system is just a very—is a small portion of our overall criminal justice system. And it's not something that I can direct by fiat to change. This is something that's going to have to be a collaboration with everybody.

So that's enough talking. Thank you for the great work you're doing. And enjoy the show. All right?

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 5:36 p.m. in the South Court Auditorium of the Dwight D. Eisenhower Executive Office Building. In his remarks, he referred to Angela Martinez, host, Power 105.1's "The Angie Martinez Show" in New York City; Attorney General Loretta E. Lynch; Shane Smith, owner and chief executive officer, VICE Media LLC; and civil rights leader and activist Alfred C. Sharpton, Jr.

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