

Public Safety

The effects of poor criminal justice outcomes on society are unacceptable: more taxes wasted on ineffective prison systems, more homelessness, and more crime. Yet, the government bureaucracies running much of our criminal justice system face no accountability for their disastrous results.

A century ago, America had high ambitions for its criminal justice system. In President Calvin Coolidge's second State of the Union address, he envisioned prisons that provide Americans "with special training in order to re-establish in them the power to pursue a law-abiding existence in the social and economic life of the Nation."

Today, America's criminal justice system falls far short of this optimistic vision, and our society faces staggering public safety crises. The United States has the highest violent crime rate in the developed world. More than seven times as many Americans are murdered per year compared to citizens of peer nations in Western Europe and East Asia. Prisons are crippled by the highest rates of employee turnover in the public sector, and correctional officers suffer from widespread depression and premature mortality. Many people released from prison do not find stable employment or housing and go on to commit additional crimes. Ultimately, very few people who leave prison do not return within ten years.

Solution

At the Cicero Institute, our aim is to equip policymakers with outcome-based solutions that encourage competition and innovation, inspire quality leadership, and ultimately strengthen our institutions from the bottom up.

Instead of relying on bureaucracy, policymakers should empower local leaders—probation chiefs, prison wardens, and officers—to use their first-hand knowledge of their communities to innovate unique approaches to rehabilitation and reward them for achieving better results than the status quo. Policies should energize the people working on the ground level of a system, give them ownership of their success, and allow their best ideas to flourish.

Why it Matters

Today, the American public is more afraid of crime than at any point in the last thirty years. Citizens want and deserve to feel safe in their communities. A majority want a rehabilitative criminal justice system that addresses underlying causes of crime like untreated mental health disorders, substance abuse, and homelessness.

Bottom Line

Holding our criminal justice system accountable for its outcomes and rewarding innovation can deliver on this vision of better, more effective institutions.