

RESOLUTION ON CRIMINAL JUSTICE, 2010
Commission on Christian Action, Evangelical Covenant Church
ABSTRACT

The Resolution on Criminal Justice (RCJ) highlights *injustice* within the U.S. criminal justice system and invites Christians, Covenant churches, and the ECC to a Christ-like response. As we seek God's kingdom in this world, God gives us a passion to seek justice and fair treatment for all our neighbors (Proverbs 29:7). The same Christ that invites us to hear the cry of the afflicted (Psalm 10:17) and care for victims of crimes (Genesis 21:8-21), also calls us to identify with and minister to prisoners (Matthew 25:36). We recognize that crime deeply harms individuals, families, and communities. At the same time, those who commit crimes rarely enter a restorative process; instead they often enter a cycle of non-redemptive despair resulting in more crime. While God empowers people to establish order through civic and political structures and institutions (1 Peter 2:13-14), these structures and institutions are imperfect and can perpetuate injustice themselves (Micah 7:2-3; Luke 18:1-8). Therefore, as God's people, we are called to expose injustice in the justice system (Amos 5:12). The RCJ recognizes that human sin and systemic injustice permeates the system meant to bring justice to victim and offender. The RCJ equally recognizes that without personal accountability and appropriate consequences for wrongdoing, there is no possibility for public safety or personal healing. We seek to engage these issues within the church while avoiding the polarization of the secular criminal justice debates.

While strong in many respects, the U.S. justice system is marred by injustice. The poor, communities of color, youth, the undereducated, and persons with mental illnesses bear the brunt of these injustices. Our society often relies too little on rehabilitative alternatives to imprisonment for those who commit non-violent crimes. This over-reliance on incarceration drains budgets, harms communities, and results in an incarceration rate of 762 per 100,000 residents – which is the highest in the world. Those most affected by this “throw away the key mentality” include the poor and people of color. The poor often receive inadequate legal representation, and as a result, longer sentences, while race is a factor in who goes to jail, as an estimated 32% of males of African descent will enter prison during their lifetime, compared to 17% of Latinos and 5.9% of White males. Once in prison, the system struggles to rehabilitate inmates, and released prisoners face enormous challenges re-entering society as their record, time in prison, and the stigma of a felony conviction often prevent them from securing gainful employment, stable housing, an education, and continued rehabilitation. Congress has also found that in the last 20 years, over 1 million inmates have been sexually assaulted in prison. Sometimes we have even condemned *innocent* people to incarceration, or even death – since 1992, 245 people in the U.S. have been exonerated by DNA testing, including seventeen people who served time on death row.

In response to this brokenness, the Church is invited to proclaim the truth that every person is made in the image of God by extending care to crime victims, listening to prisoners' stories and sharing with them Christ's hope, and by providing emotional, spiritual, and financial support to families of prisoners and victims. As God's people, we also have the opportunity to respond to systemic injustice in the criminal justice system by challenging unjust and ineffective policies that harm and degrade others. We do this by promoting fair sentencing reform, restorative justice programs, and alternatives to incarceration (especially for first-time, nonviolent offenders.) We can also seek to confront the effects of race and socio-economic status in the system, as well as our society's culture of fear that leads to a “throw away the key” mentality. While those who commit crimes must be held accountable and deterred through fair sentences, the church extends Christ's mercy to all (Psalm 85:10). God graciously invites and empowers us to live as a restorative community of believers who witness to the hope that comes from God. Practically, this means helping facilitate the reconciliation of offender with offended whenever possible; helping ex-offenders meaningfully reintegrate into the community; and welcoming ex-offenders into our churches. Finally, we are invited to prevent individuals from entering the cycle of crime and brokenness by addressing causes of crime. Preventions may include mentoring and tutoring youth, substance abuse prevention, mental health treatment, job training, and job placement. By God's grace, may we seek this kingdom response to the injustice within our criminal justice system.