

Join Us: Stand Against Irrational Drug Laws in the Quest for Racial Justice

Dear Colleague,

It is our honor to give our full support to the framework for the package on racial justice in policing, led by Chairwoman Karen Bass, Senator Booker, Senator Harris and Chairman Nadler. They have experience, credibility, and expertise that has been used to craft a framework that should command the support of all of us. The overall approach is one that we hope will unite us and provide the foundation for path-breaking reform legislation that is badly needed and long-overdue.

In this same spirit, we ask you to consider another crucial issue towards criminal justice reform: eliminating the failed prohibition on cannabis.

We have all seen the pernicious effects of selective enforcement of cannabis prohibition across the country, and it is not just in red states or rural Republican America. We have seen for the last 50 years the cannabis prohibition used disproportionately against people of color, especially young Black men. The use of cannabis is fairly uniform across different racial groups, but the people caught up in the net of cannabis enforcement are heavily skewed towards these young Black men. In Manhattan, until recently, Black people were eight times more likely to be arrested than white people, even though, as stated, the rate of use is the same. This placed too many under the pressure of selective and discriminatory enforcement, the threat of mandatory minimums, and overly punitive three-strikes and you're out sentencing laws. This often resulted in innocent people pleading guilty with district attorneys in order to avoid being prosecuted under much more stringent terms with harsh penalties almost assured.

It is time that we as Democrats take a stand against this pernicious hold-over from Richard Nixon's blatant attempt at criminalizing the behavior of African Americans. These policies have resulted in an explosion of the American prison population. The prison population in 1970 was 372,000 people; this exploded by a factor of 300% by 1990, almost doubled again by the year 2000, and currently is 2.3 million. The statistics of racial disparities in the corrections system are appalling, known to us all, and driven by non-violent drug offenses coupled with selective enforcement.

The simplest and most direct thing we could do would be to enact the MORE Act from Chairman Nadler's Judiciary Committee, which was modeled after Congresswoman Barbara Lee's Marijuana Justice Act. This key legislation was passed onto the floor with a bipartisan vote four months ago. This carefully crafted legislation will legalize cannabis, provide restorative justice to communities of color torn apart by the failed War on Drugs, stop the nonsense of not being able to research it, remove the barriers to people getting medicine, and eliminate the impacts of cannabis prohibition on educational funding and access to public housing.

We urge you to examine these issues, the legislative options, and to make federal cannabis reform part of the communities' support in their quest for racial justice. We have information in greater specificity, if you wish, and have other pieces of legislation that will improve this tragic situation. Regardless, we hope you will be mindful of this rank injustice and the overwhelming support, which includes 93% of voters under 30. The cannabis reform train has left the station. Two-thirds of the states have taken meaningful action, 12 have legalized adult-use, and public opinion will support us in this effort to correct these grave injustices.

It's not all about chokeholds and the police, it's about blatant, discriminatory, irrational drug laws that have destroyed so many lives. We urge you to join us. For more information, please contact Amber Ray in Rep. Blumenauer's office at amber.ray@mail.house.gov or Samira Damavandi in Rep. Lee's office at Samira.Damavandi@mail.house.gov.

Sincerely,

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