

# Chairman Gowdy Opening Statement

## ["Criminal Justice Reform and Efforts to Reduce Recidivism"](#)

**Chairman Trey Gowdy (R-SC):**



*Remarks as Delivered:*

This hearing is on one aspect of our criminal justice system. I want to say another thank you to our two senators who were with us. And I want to

thank two people who are not with us today. One is Elijah Cummings for his commitment to criminal justice reform - which is a commitment that has spanned three decades. Mr. Cummings and I have spoken about today's hearing several times and he very much wanted to be here. He will be back soon, and we will continue to explore this topic particularly within the jurisdiction of intergovernmental cooperation.

I also want to thank Bob Goodlatte, whose the Chairman of the Judiciary Committee. Criminal justice reform is principally an issue within the jurisdiction of that committee. Chairman Goodlatte has been very gracious and accommodating in allowing us to go forward even as he and his Committee do the very same.

And the reason there are at least two committees in the House who are exploring our justice system is because it is so vital to the strength and longevity of our republic. Our justice system must be both respected and worthy of respect. Our justice system must both be fair in reality and be perceived as fair. Our justice system must be proportional. It must protect the innocents. It must punish those who have not conformed to societal norms, with those societal norms reflected and codified in our law.

Fair. Evenhanded. Proportional. Just. Equal in intent and application. Those are not merely aspirations, those are expectations. They are our expectations for the world's most envied justice system.

I guess 'blind' is the word most of us use to associate with justice. Justice is blind. It's blind to race. It's blind to gender. It's blind to status. It's blind to wealth. It's blind to everything other than the merits of the relative arguments.

In reality Lady Justice, who is the mythological personification of our aspirations and expectations, is not blind. She is blindfolded. She can see. She just affirmatively chooses not to see who or what is before her. That is really hard. That requires discipline. It requires restraint. Lady Justice may not look, but that should not keep us from doing so. To make

sure that our system is as perfect as mortals can make something.

A significant percentage of our fellow citizens have some criminal history. And the overwhelming majority of those currently incarcerated will be released from confinement when the sentence is completed. What do we do when the sentences imposed have been served, the debt to society paid, the offender is reentering society? There are familial obligations to be met. There are societal obligations to be met. There may well be restitution owed to the victims of the previous conduct. And what we owe most to the victims is to lower the chance they will be victimized again. It is in all of our interests these reentries be successful. It is in all of our interests these transitions back into society are successful.

Those leaving incarceration for re-entry will often find society has changed, sometimes dramatically. There will be educational deficits and skills deficits in addition to the challenge of overcoming the stigma of a conviction.

Our penal system has several aspects to it. There's a punishment aspect, there's a separation from society aspect, there's also a rehabilitation aspect. A restoration, if you will. A correction.

We ask the prisons at both the state and federal level to do a lot of things. And as I tell one of our witnesses who is my friend and he is the Director of Corrections in South Carolina, Brian Sterling, he has the hardest job in all of law enforcement. Keep those confined who are supposed to be confined. Protect the safety of the women and men working in the prisons. Protect the safety of other inmates. Provide health care, meals, and make sure those incarcerated are ready for reentry. And oh by the way you will only make the news if something goes wrong or if there is an escape.

Today is not about what's gone wrong or escapes. It's about hearing what works with respect to reentry, and it's about hearing how we can best serve the broader society by lowering recidivism. The lower the recidivism rate the fewer the victims there are. The lower the recidivism rate the lower the cost to society.

Tim Scott is not with us right now, but I want to say what I said about him earlier - its not easy to talk about criminal justice reform back home. We are frankly not asked about it a lot. So for him, it is the dual challenge of both elevating an issue to the level of public consciousness and then addressing the merits in a respectful way. It takes courage to do that, and we're lucky that Tim has that in abundance.

And I'll say this on behalf of senator Booker who was with us earlier - he not only talks about criminal justice reform during open congressional hearings, he talks about it at corner tables of restaurants with no one else around. He talks about it in private conversations when there's no attention to be had. He even talks about it with people with whom he may not agree on any other issue, which demonstrates a level of commitment that is necessary to effectuate change.

There is nothing more disheartening than to hear our fellow citizens express distrust or disrespect for our justice system. When all the other institutions of society are challenged, the justice system should be the one that we can run to. To paraphrase from an old hymn, the ground at the foot of the courthouse is level. We should have confidence in the justice process from the moment we enter the courthouse until the debt is paid and the correction is complete.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today on what we can do to help those reentering society, what works, what doesn't work, and how we can bolster confidence in this realm of our justice system.