



PRISON TRANSPARENCY PROJECT REPORT:

The Influence of Correctional Officer Unions on Criminal Justice Reform

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THE INFLUENCE OF CORRECTIONAL OFFICER UNIONS ON CRIMINAL JUSTICE REFORM

The Power and Influence of Correctional Officer Unions

- **National Reach:** Correctional officer unions across the United States hold considerable power, significantly influencing local, state, and national policies related to the criminal justice system. These unions, representing tens of thousands of correctional officers, collect substantial union dues, which are then used to fund political campaigns and lobbying efforts. The collective financial power of these unions allows them to exert considerable influence over legislation and policy decisions.

- **Political Influence:** Correctional officer unions often lobby for tougher sentencing laws, increased prison funding, and policies that lead to the expansion of the prison system even though that is against the best interest of America as a whole. Their political contributions frequently support candidates who are aligned with their interests, which often prioritize job security and growth within the corrections industry over broader criminal justice reforms. This influence can lead to a focus on incarceration over rehabilitation, hindering efforts to reduce prison populations and implement more humane, effective alternatives.

The Challenge to Criminal Justice Reform

- **Conflict of Interest:** The core mission of correctional officer unions is to protect the jobs and benefits of their members. This can create a conflict of interest when it comes to criminal justice reform. Policies aimed at reducing incarceration rates—such as the expansion of diversion programs or the elimination of mandatory minimum sentences—can be seen as threats to union jobs. As a result, these unions may oppose reforms that could lead to fewer prisons or reduced staffing levels, even when such reforms are in the public interest.

- **Barrier to Reform:** The influence of correctional officer unions presents a significant barrier to criminal justice reform efforts. Their ability to shape policy and legislation means that any attempt to reduce incarceration rates or shift towards a more rehabilitative approach must contend with the political power of

these unions. This can slow down or even prevent the adoption of reforms that would lead to a more just and equitable system.

Moving Towards a Balanced Approach

- **Reducing Union Influence:** To ensure that criminal justice policies are driven by fairness and justice rather than the financial interests of powerful unions, there is a need to reduce the disproportionate influence of correctional officer unions on policy-making. This could involve implementing campaign finance reforms that limit the ability of unions to make large political contributions or increasing transparency around the ways in which these unions influence legislation.

- **Focusing on Public Interest:** Policymakers and advocates must work to prioritize the public interest in criminal justice reform discussions. This means focusing on the goals of reducing recidivism, promoting rehabilitation, and ensuring that prisons are reserved for those who pose a genuine threat to society. By shifting the focus away from maintaining the status quo, it is possible to create a more balanced approach that better serves the needs of both the community and those within the criminal justice system.

A Call for Accountability

- **Holding Unions Accountable:** Correctional officer unions, like any other powerful interest group, must be held accountable for their role in shaping public policy. This includes ensuring that their activities are subject to the same scrutiny and transparency as other influential organizations. By holding these unions accountable, we can help ensure that criminal justice policies are made in the best interest of society as a whole, rather than being driven by the narrow interests of a specific group.

This report is part of a series produced by the Prison Transparency Project, aimed at uncovering and addressing issues within the prison system. For additional reports and recommendations, please visit our website at

<https://prisontransparency.com>.