

2024 Public Safety Agenda for Members of Congress



INTRODUCTION

The U.S. Congress plays a key role in crafting and elevating policies that can effect change at the federal level or offer support to state and local authorities. Because public safety is a **top concern** among voters, members from across the country must address this important issue. Here, we elaborate on key initiatives we have researched extensively to help federal lawmakers promote smart legislation that can help combat crime and promote public safety.

AGENDA

POLICING REFORM:

Striking the proper balance between smart criminal justice initiatives that promote public safety and answering public outcry for dramatic changes to law enforcement structure and operations.

- ? **Why:** Since summer 2020, public scrutiny **has hit police** in a way that has affected their ability to perform their jobs successfully, let alone accountably and transparently. It is important to ensure that all sworn officers operate within the confines of the law themselves in order to increase their legitimacy.
- ✓ **Benefit:** Increasing accountability, improving training, encouraging self-reporting data, promoting transparency, and fostering community policing and **alternate response models** can all bolster police legitimacy within communities. This in turn improves the quality of policing—particularly the quality of officers themselves, which is critical to public safety.
- ⓘ **Keep in Mind:** Currently, there are about **700,000 sworn law enforcement officers** in the country experiencing daily job-related stress, compounded by a **recruitment and retention** crisis that often results in excessive overtime and the added workload of acting as social workers, medical responders, conflict mediators, and other roles not considered typical of law enforcement. In order to better support police and enhance public safety, we must look to fully fund departments so that they can make some of the changes society is asking of them while protecting and serving effectively.

POLICING REFORM:
(continued)

- ? **Where Congress Stands:**
 - [Implementation of the Law Enforcement De-escalation Training Act of 2022](#)
 - [Recruit and Retain Act](#)

JUVENILE JUSTICE:
Limiting juvenile interaction with the justice system where possible in order to prioritize rehabilitation over harsh punishment, which can lead to less criminality in the future.

- ? **Why:** Juvenile violent crimes [have increased](#) in recent years, raising the question of how the system can better address youth in terms of preventing them from engaging in criminal activity to begin with and limiting the likelihood of such behavior occurring again.
- ✓ **Benefit:** Unnecessarily detaining juveniles can [lower their likelihood](#) of graduating from high school and actually increase their likelihood of further criminal activity as an adult, as incarceration severs social ties critical to positive development. Instead, we should utilize community treatment and practices like deflection and restorative justice for low-level juvenile offenders to ensure they are less likely to offend in the future.
- ⓘ **Keep in Mind:** Juveniles certainly must be [held accountable](#) for their actions, especially when they cause harm to others. Harsh punishments should be reserved for serious cases to remove dangerous juveniles from the community for a period of time to both punish and rehabilitate them. Reforms do not mean that crime is not taken seriously.
- ? **Where Congress Stands:**
 - [Reauthorization of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act](#)
 - [Preventing Unfair Sentencing Act of 2023](#)

CANNABIS REFORM:
Descheduling cannabis will give states the latitude they need to properly regulate, tax, and establish legal structures that can ensure safe, competitive, and legal cannabis markets.

- ? **Why:** Currently, [38 states](#) allow some form of legal cannabis, and [53 percent of Americans](#) live in a state with a legal cannabis market. However, the federal government still classifies the substance as highly illegal. This creates a “[dual legality](#)” that undermines the legitimacy of law enforcement in their efforts to enforce such vastly different patchworks of laws with which a supermajority of the American public disagrees.
- ✓ **Benefit:** Descheduling cannabis, or removing it from the [Controlled Substances Act](#), can [resolve the problem](#) of dual legality and allow states to determine their own cannabis laws with limited federal interference. With the proper research, guidance, and oversight, state governments will be able to smartly regulate and tax the substance in a manner that reduces the operations of illicit markets, where unsafe products and more violent crime occur.
- ⓘ **Keep in Mind:** Cannabis descheduling can [reduce negative community-police interactions](#), bolster police-community relations, and allow law enforcement to spend more of their time combating violent crime and other crimes that make communities feel unsafe.
- ? **Where Congress Stands:**
 - [Strengthening the Tenth Amendment Through Entrusting States \(STATES\) 2.0 Act](#)
 - [Harnessing Opportunities by Pursuing Expungement \(HOPE\) Act of 2023](#)
 - [Secure And Fair Enforcement Regulation \(SAFER\) Banking Act](#)

RECIDIVISM REDUCTION:

Ensuring that the justice system prioritizes minimizing the likelihood of reoffense upon release and does not simply write off individuals after they enter the system—no matter their offense.

FOR ADDITIONAL SUPPORT

- ? **Why:** Because around [95 percent](#) of all individuals incarcerated in America will eventually return to society, it is critical that we look at our federal sentencing laws, prison and supervision policies, and reentry initiatives closely to ensure these individuals have every opportunity to be successful in a law-abiding life following their interaction with the system.
- ✓ **Benefit:** Whether it is bringing [sentencing laws](#) in line with research regarding [deterrence](#), ensuring an effective but not overly burdensome probation and parole system, expanding recidivism reduction programming and opportunities for [home confinement](#), or allowing those who have proven their capability to remain crime-free for years after incarceration the ability to have their [record sealed](#), Congress should always look to adopt more of and improve on existing practices that have proven [successful](#) in protecting public safety by limiting the chances of new crimes being committed.
- **Keep in Mind:** The [First Step Act](#), the landmark criminal justice reform legislation signed into law by then-President Donald J. Trump, just passed its five-year anniversary. Its reforms have [demonstrated](#) that recidivism reduction efforts work well to enhance public safety. Recidivism rates for those released under the First Step Act are an estimated [37 percent lower](#) than their counterparts.
- 📍 **Where Congress Stands:**
 - [Clean Slate Act of 2023](#)
 - [Eliminating a Quantifiably Unjust Application of the Law \(EQUAL\) Act](#)
 - [Safer Supervision Act of 2023](#)

● If you need help with further research around these issues, information on implementing these types of initiatives, or anything else, please do not hesitate to reach out.

Sarah Anderson is the associate director for Criminal Justice and Civil Liberties at the R Street at sanderson@rstreet.org.

Anthony Lamorena is a senior manager for Federal Government Affairs at the R Street at alamorena@rstreet.org.