

## Remarks by the President after Visit at El Reno Federal Correctional Institution

The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

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El Reno, Oklahoma

\*\*Please see below for a correction marked with an asterisk

11:25 A.M. CDT

THE PRESIDENT: Hello, everybody. So I'm just going to make a very quick statement.

I want to thank the folks who were involved here in helping to arrange this visit at El Reno Federal Penitentiary. And this is part of our effort to highlight both the challenges and opportunities that we face with respect to the criminal justice system.

Many of you heard me speak on Tuesday in Philadelphia about the fact that the United States accounts for 5 percent of the world's population, we account for 25 percent of the world's inmates. And that represents a huge surge since 1980. A primary driver of this mass incarceration phenomenon is our drug laws --our mandatory minimum sentencing around drug laws. And we have to consider whether this is the smartest way for us to both control crime and rehabilitate individuals.

This is costing taxpayers across America \$80 billion a year. And as I said on Tuesday, there are people who need to be in prison, and I don't have tolerance for violent criminals. Many of them may have made mistakes, but we need to keep our communities safe. On the other hand, when we're looking at nonviolent offenders, most of them growing up in environments in which the drug traffic is common, where many of their family members may have been involved in the drug trade, we have to reconsider whether 20-year, 30-year, life sentences for nonviolent crimes is the best way for us to solve these problems.

Here at El Reno, there's some excellent work that's being done inside this facility to provide job training, college degrees, drug counseling. The question is not only how do we make sure that we sustain those programs here in the prison, but how do we make sure that those same kind of institutional supports are there for kids and teenagers before they get into the criminal justice system, and are there ways for us to divert young people who make mistakes early on in life so that they don't get into the system in the first place.

The good news is, is that we've got Democrats and Republicans who I think are starting to work together in Congress, and we're starting to see bipartisan efforts in state legislatures as well to start to reexamine some of these sentencing laws, to look at what kinds of work we can do in the community to keep kids out of the criminal justice system in the first place, how we can build on the successes for rehabilitation of all individuals who are incarcerated, and then what can we do to improve reentry going forward.

I just had the chance to meet with six inmates, all of them in for drug offenses. Many of them here for very long sentences. And every single one of them emphasized the fact that they understood they had done something wrong, they were prepared to take responsibility for it. But they also urged us to think

about how could society have reached them earlier on in life to keep them out of trouble. They expressed huge appreciation for the educational opportunities and drug counseling that they had here in prison, and they expressed some fear and concern about how difficult the transition was going to be.

So we've got an opportunity to make a difference at a time when, overall, violent crime rates have been dropping at the same time as incarcerations last year dropped for the first time in 40 years. My hope is that if we can keep on looking at the evidence, keep on looking at the facts, figure out what works, then we can start making the change that will save taxpayers money, keep our streets safe, and perhaps most importantly, keep families intact, and break this cycle in which young people -- particularly young people of color -- are so prone to end up in a criminal justice system that makes it harder for them to ever get a job and ever be effective, full citizens of this country.

So I want to express appreciation to everybody who helped make this happen. I want to give a special shout-out to our prison guards. They've got a really tough job, and most of them are doing it in exemplary fashion. One of the things that we talked about is how we can continue to improve conditions in prisons. This is an outstanding institution within the system, and yet, they've got enormous overcrowding issues. I just took a look in a cell where, because of overcrowding, typically we might have three people housed in a cell that looks to be, what, 15 by --

PARTICIPANT: Nine by 10.

THE PRESIDENT: What?

\*WARDEN SCARANTINO CORRECTIONAL OFFICER WARLICK: Nine by 10.

THE PRESIDENT: Nine by 10 -- three, whole-grown men in a 9-by-10 cell. There's been some improvement -- now we have two. But overcrowding like that is something that has to be addressed.

As I said the other day, gang activity, sexual assault inside of these prisons -- those are all things that have to be addressed. And so we're also going to be consulting with prison guards, wardens and others to see how we can make some critical reforms.

A lot of this, though, is going to have to happen at the state level. So my goal is that we start seeing some improvements at the federal level, and that we're then able to see states across the country pick up the baton. And there are already some states that are leading the way on both sentencing reform as well as prison reform. We want to make sure that we're seeing what works and build off that.

Thanks, everybody.

Q Mr. President, what struck you most about seeing the prison here today?

THE PRESIDENT: What's that?

Q What struck you most about seeing this prison here today?

THE PRESIDENT: Visiting with these six individuals. I've said this before -- when they describe their youth and their childhood, these are young people who made mistakes that aren't that different than the mistakes I made and the mistakes that a lot of you guys made. The difference is they did not have the kinds of support structures, the second chances, the resources that would allow them to survive those mistakes.

And I think we have a tendency sometimes to almost take for granted or think it's normal that so many young people end up in our criminal justice system. It's not normal. It's not what happens in other countries.

What is normal is teenagers doing stupid things. What is normal is young people making mistakes. And we've got to be able to distinguish between dangerous individuals who need to be incapacitated and incarcerated versus young people who, in an environment in which they are adapting but if given different opportunities, a different vision of life, could be thriving the way we are.

That's what strikes me -- there but for the grace of God. And that I think is something that we all have to think about.

Thank you.

END

11:33 A.M. CDT