ACLU of Mississippi Releases Blueprint with Roadmap for Cutting Incarceration by 50 Percent

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Jackson, **MS** — The ACLU of Mississippi today released a report with recommendations that could lead to a 50 percent reduction in Mississippi's prison population.

The report is a part of the ACLU's Smart Justice 50-State Blueprints project, a comprehensive, state-by-state analysis of factors that contribute to mass incarceration and includes reforms that if implemented would end our overreliance on incarceration.

The Blueprint includes an overview of Mississippi' incarcerated populations, including analysis on who is being sent to jail and prison and the racial disparities that are present, what drives people into the system, how long people spend behind bars, and why people are imprisoned for so long.

Some of the key findings include:

- Mississippi's prison population has grown nearly fivefold since 1980.
- While Black men make up 34% of the male population in Mississippi, they make up 65% of the prison population, which translates to one in 30 Black men in prison.
- Drug offenses are the leading driver of this incarceration epidemic. For example, selling just 2 grams of most drugs carries up to 20 years in prison.
- The majority of people in county jails about 56 percent have not yet been convicted of a crime and are awaiting trial.

"While recent reforms over the last few years has reduced Mississippi's prison population, the state ranks third in the country for the number of people we lock up every day," said Jennifer Riley Collins, ACLU of Mississippi Executive Director. "This addiction to prison is ruining families and communities and costing taxpayers about \$330 million in corrections costs. To get to better outcomes for the criminal justice system in Mississippi, we must take a different approach and divert resources toward education, infrastructure, and economic stimulation."

Some of the key reforms include:

- Urgent efforts should focus on bail reform, an evaluation of prosecutorial practices, sentencing reform for burglary offenses, and increasing access to alternatives for incarceration for drug-related offenses.
- Policymakers should take state prison time off the table for low-level drug and property
 offenses and reduce them to misdemeanors.
- The Legislature should also take a comprehensive approach to reform the state's extreme minimum and maximum sentencing laws as well as sentence enhancements for people with prior convictions.

In the coming weeks, the ACLU of Mississippi will convene a briefing with the public, advocates, and policymakers to share the findings of the Blueprint and discuss strategies on how to move the criminal justice reform agenda further forward.

The Smart Justice 50-State Blueprints are the first-ever analysis of its kind and will serve as a tool for activists, advocates and policymakers to push for transformational change to the criminal justice system. They are the result of a multi-year partnership between the ACLU, state affiliates, and the Urban Institute to develop actionable policy options for each state that capture the nuance of local laws and sentencing practices.

"The shape of mass incarceration in Massachusetts or Ohio looks different than it does in Arizona or Mississippi. But no matter where you are, the fact is there are far too many people behind bars," said Udi Ofer, director of the ACLU Campaign for Smart Justice. "We hope that the Smart Justice 50-State Blueprints provide necessary guideposts for activists and policymakers as they pursue local solutions that will address the stark racial disparities in our criminal justice system and dramatically reduce their jail and prison populations. Some of the reforms contained in the Blueprints are readily achievable, while others are going to require audacious change. But all are needed to prioritize people over prisons."

The reports are all viewable on an interactive website that allows users to visualize the reductions in jail and prison population that would result from the policy decisions that states pursue. The interactive feature is viewable here: 50stateblueprint.aclu.org

The Mississippi Blueprint can be viewed here: https://50stateblueprint.aclu.org/states/mississippi

The ACLU Campaign for Smart Justice is an unprecedented, multiyear effort to reduce the U.S. jail and prison population by 50 percent and to combat racial disparities in the criminal justice system. We are working in all 50 states for reforms to usher in a new era of justice in America. The ACLU Campaign for Smart Justice is fighting in the legislatures, the courts, and in the streets to end mass incarceration.

For more information about the ACLU's Campaign for Smart Justice: https://www.aclu.org/issues/smart-justice

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