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Koch brothers unite right and left, sponsor panel on prison reform

Posted By [Robby Soave](#) On 10:47 AM 04/17/2014 In | [No Comments](#)

The Koch brothers, known for spending millions of dollars to elect Republicans and promote limited government conservatism, sponsored a bipartisan panel Wednesday on criminal justice reform.

Not high taxes. Not the myth of climate change. Not Milton Friedman's ideas about a free economy.

Criminal justice reform.

And while it may shock the far-left that such an issue would find support among billionaire businessmen Charles and David Koch—often lampooned as the financial sources of all evil by many Democrats, particularly Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid—changing federal sentencing guidelines actually fits right in with the libertarian agenda of the Charles G. Koch Institute.

The panel was [hosted](#) by Mediaite's Andrew Kirell, and took place in Austin, Texas. Participants included the Texas Public Policy Foundation's Marc Levin, the NAACP's Gary Bledsoe, former New York City police commissioner Bernard Kerik and the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers' Norman Reimer.

The speakers represented a broad spectrum of political views, but they all agreed on the pressing need for criminal justice reform. ([RELATED: Lawmakers consider bipartisan sentencing reform](#))

Participants in the discussion highlighted a few facts. First, the United States is responsible for 5 percent of the world's population and 25 percent of its prison population. America incarcerates more people than any other country in the world, in both absolute and proportional terms.

Reimer highlighted the absurdity of the supposedly freest country in the world jailing one quarter of the world's population.

"Are we a nation of bad people?" he asked rhetorically. "I don't think we are."

The fault lies with mandatory minimum sentences, which are written into the federal legal code. Federal judges are required by law to impose harsh sentences on defendants convicted of certain crimes. The largest category is drug possession, the most common drug is marijuana, and the most common marijuana offense is simple possession.

Simple possession of marijuana—a substance that is no longer illegal in several states—can land convicted suspects jail sentences of 5, 10, and 20 years, even if they did little else, or even nothing else, wrong. ([RELATED: Nonviolent offenders obeyed state laws, went to jail anyway](#))

Kerik, a former New York City police commissioner, related his personal perspective on the issue. As a narcotics agent in the 1980s and 90s, Kerik investigated and ended many illegal drug operations. He later plead guilty to ethics violations and tax fraud, and spent three years in prison. A month into his sentence, he met a young black man from Baltimore.

"I asked him how much time he had, what he had been sentenced to," said Kerik. "I was told, 10 years. He was sentenced to 10 years in federal prison, for 5 grams of cocaine... I was sickened by it. All I could think of, after being there for a month, we're going to keep this kid in prison for 8 and a half years. He's not going to learn anything except how to steal, cheat, lie manipulate, con, gamble and fight. And then we are going to let him out and send him back into society. I don't think it's better for society. I think it destroys society."

Black people use drugs at similar rates as white people, and yet blacks are three times more likely to be arrested for drug possession, according to the NAACP's Gary Bledsoe. This disparity

has produced an overall U.S. prison population that is 60 percent minorities.

The panelists argued that overcrowded U.S. prisons are not only inhumane—they are also financially ruinous, and contribute to state and federal deficits.

It's no accident that groups like the Koch Institute are gathering diverse thinkers to discuss criminal justice reform. A growing consensus of public policy experts, lawmakers and advocates believe that federal sentencing guidelines are in desperate need of reform.

Political actors as dissimilar as Attorney General Eric Holder and Kentucky Republican Senator Rand Paul are in agreement on eliminating harsh sentences for nonviolent drug offenders and reducing the U.S. prison population. ([RELATED: Eric Holder and the tea party agree on one thing: Reform drug sentences](#))

Julie Stewart, president of Families Against Mandatory Minimums, [wrote](#) last year that favorable political conditions have created a "perfect storm" for sentencing reform, and many conservative groups are at the forefront of that effort.

"The Texas Public Policy Foundation created a new organization of conservative leaders to boost these state efforts," she wrote. "Newt Gingrich, Jeb Bush, Bill Bennett, Ed Meese, and Grover Norquist are just some of the prominent conservatives who have endorsed the Right on Crime platform."

She also noted that David Koch has been a donor to FAMM for many years.

The full Austin panel discussion can be [viewed here](#).

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