NOTES & HIGHLIGHTS FROM SYMPOSIUM

Bobby Vassar

One of the things you want to be careful about is to not expect too much, too soon. I was in several major criminal justice reform campaigns, for example the juvenile accountability block grant...The prison rape elimination Act, which was an effort led by Sen. Sessions (now AG) in the senate, and Bobby Scott who I worked for in the house. But it took three congresses, even though we had a lot of agreement on both sides, it took three congresses before it became law.

“Regardless of what happens on the federal level, it’s not reason to be despondent because 98% of what happens with crime is at the state level. And what’s happening at the state level is really great-- there is an apparent competition going out there, and interestingly led by conservative republicans, as to who can do the most innovative, productive evidence-based approaches to reforming criminal justice, And it’s all the way from sentencing reform to collateral consequences, and felon voting, and the kinds of things that were dead in the water if you even mentioned them a few years ago, and now are moving fast.”

“Politicians like to be viewed as leaders, so sometimes what it takes is for the public to get out in front and then the politicians to quickly get ahead of them and appear to be leading— so that’s where journalism, information counts.”

Heather Rice-Minus (Prison Fellowship)

“I absolutely still think bipartisan criminal justice reform exists. I think the question becomes how will that be packaged? and i think many are waiting to see what the Trump administration…what policies might there be an appetite for....

“We might be able to still find some bipartisan agreement with the new administration. And last Congress, federal prison reform was a big topic—I think there’s still an appetite for re-entry, and recognizing that when people come back we want to make sure that they have access to employment and other things that will actually help them to be productive citizens....

“These are the types of topics that the trump administration may still be willing to entertain, and that we should think through carefully how we message them, and what messengers we send to present the data to the new administration....

“We saw the new executive orders that just came out against violent crime, and a task force on violent crime, and wanting to look into violence against police officers. I think on the right it would be a misstep to say no, that’s not what we want. The
message that conservatives can send-- and they should be the messengers, and they should be outspoken-- is that if you really want less violent crime, here’s how you do it. And it’s not just these things, President Trump, it’s also looking at evidence-based programming in prisons, it’s looking at how long we incarcerate people, the diminishing return of incarceration, and all of these things that states, red states included, have tested and tried and are true.

Nick Turner (Vera Institute of Justice)

“There’s a lot more that is going on than just this debate about Trump’s views about crime rates, and whether in fact violent crime is at its highest in 45 or 47 years.

The president obviously has a powerful megaphone. And you can see the power of it in this room: three months ago, we were having a sophisticated conversation about a much broader array of criminal justice issues, and now we’re all debating this violent crime question. We’re all doing it, and it’s like we’re a school of fish that have all swum in this one direction, despite the fact that we have experience and there’s been a lot of good journalism, and a lot of good work that’s focused on a much richer range of topics.

We are at risk at having a giant sucking sound in the justice reform movement, where everyone starts to focus on this question. Then the debate is won in a way, and that will be a problem because it will undermine the momentum for reform if everyone gets diverted and focuses on this….

And so I want to suggest that it’s hugely important for journalists to think about, I’m going to describe it as a different set of alternative facts. I don’t mean facts that are not facts— but facts that are about other things that relate to justice reform, that you may not be asking because the debate just swung, or because your editors are saying to you ‘what’s the answer to this question?’ and all of the incentives are starting to move to answer this particular question.”

Lorenzo Brooks (on incarceration)

One of the things that really amazed me about this criminal justice system is that it can eliminate your bonds and your ties to your family and your friends. and you can find yourself all alone. And study after study has found that strengthening those bonds between friends and family reduces the chance that you’re going to recidivate when you do go home. And this is one of the things that seems to work. But right now in Gov Cuomo’s latest budget proposal, he is proposing eliminating some of those visits! He is proposing reducing the ties between prisoners and their family and friends.
You heard me say I was going to college when I was in prison. Well, I got 74 credits and that was it. They cut the Pell funding that was funding my college when I was in there. It took up 1% of their budget, but they cut it saying they were saving money. This was one of the things they knew worked. There’s evidence across the board that educating the prisoners reduces recidivism, but they cut it; evidence across the board that bonds between a prisoner and his family works to reduce recidivism, but they cut it.

Why do you keep on cutting things if they work?"

Jordan Richardson (Koch Institute)

“I think there’s a huge need for not only the government, but the private sector to get involved here. There are a lot of organizations that we work with, and they focus on trying to do actual education for prisoners. So what they do is they’ll go in, and they’ll say look— your population they need to have a degree or need to have work training requirements before they get out of prison, and it’s harder once you’re out of prison to get a job unless you have certification.

“I think there’s a place for good people and good organizations to step in and say, if the government doesn’t have the funds, we’re going to step in and do something ourselves. In Texas, there’s a program called the prison entrepreneurship program. Their recidivism rate is incredibly low for the people that they work with.”

Marc Schindler (The Sentencing Project)

“Over the last several years, we have been almost at consensus on non-violent offenders, but any time we get to a conversation about people who are charged with violent behavior, often times the conversation stops. People sort of run in the other direction. The reality is, if we’re going to reduce the prison population significantly, if we’re going to get even close to levels of incarceration where we were in the 70s and 80s before we had mass incarceration, we’re going to have to address people who are charged with violent offenses, because that’s more than half the people in prison, particularly at the state level. So we have to have that conversation, and be willing to get beyond the offense.”
Joe Allbaugh (Okla Department of Corrections)

The first thing that goes when you’re cramming people in prisons, both male and female are programs. Programs are the key to success. We were so overcrowded that we eliminated all programs, and that program space was turned into dormitories. Only 8 of our 18 major facilities were ever designed and built as a prison. Most of them are boys’ schools, girls’ schools, mental health hospitals, or regular hospitals.

94% of our population returns to society. Guess what we want? We want good neighbors. We’re not returning those 94% equipped with the education, the skills to not go out and recreate the problem that they had.

[Oklahoma is] number one on the incarceration rate of women. That’s going to increase, at current rates, by 60% over the next ten years. That’s unacceptable. Overall, we’re going to increase our population 25% over the next few years, unless we do something different. I’ve asked for 2 new prisons immediately. If those numbers hold up, provided by CGI and Pew, I’ll need 5 prisons over that 10 year period. Prisons aren’t cheap.

Carrie Petus-Davis (Smart Decarceration Initiative)

This whole ‘it’s too expensive” piece is a non-starter--it’s been too expensive for four decades, and that didn’t change behaviors. But i think if we do start talking to the values of the bulk of American people, that will continue to contribute to the momentum for change in the way we do criminal justice. We know empirically, we know morally, and we know through experience, that mass incarceration is bad for national progress. the more we can remind people of that, the more movement we’re going to get. another thing that we know is that criminal behavior currently in the united states does not predict criminal justice involvement. and if we continue to remind people of that, we’ll get to some of the racial and economic injustice issues that are going on. So I’m hopeful, but we have to pay attention.

TRACIE KEESEE (NYPD)

It’s a challenge for any chief who’s got to go in under this administration and try to figure out what’s going to happen, and try to keep everything on an even keel. We’re not moving away from 21st century policing, I don't think the communities are going to allow that to happen. and so we are focused on that, and we're trying to make sure we move forward with it. If you’re in New york, crime is low, albeit not in every community, and not every community is feeling it. But officers are truly not understanding why we’re even having these conversations. Because they believe for the most part they did what they were asked to do, and they did it very well. That’s really one of the bigger questions, is— We don’t understand why we’re not getting a parade.
Chris MAGNUS (POLICE CHIEF, TUCSON)

Arguably there are still many departments around the country that really quite haven’t figured out community policing. We act like that war was won, and I’m not sure that’s the case. There are also many departments that just as they struggle in their relationships with their communities. They also struggle with their relationships with their own officers. And it’s not uncommon in fact to see a direct correlation between how police officers treat the community.

One of the things we’ve been experimenting with is this whole issue of a critical incident review board.

Historically in departments, even the most progressive, these review processes really tend to be sort of under the radar. It’s very frustrating. Even with a lot of officer shooting cases-- there is obviously the criminal piece that’s made, an investigation done that goes out to a D.A. or prosecutor and they decide if anybody gets charged. But that’s only the beginning of the discussion. What happens next is really to me often the most important part, which is: what went on that led up to that incident? How was it handled? What sort of policy, equipment, or supervision changes need to be made so perhaps things go better— or at least, what can we learn from that?

What happened, and what are the takeaways from that? And we don’t do that very much with our personnel.”