



Advanced | Exemplar Essay

Criminal Justice Reform

Reform the Root Causes of Inequity



Claim and Focus

A precise, arguable claim is introduced (“mandatory minimum sentences must be eliminated for nonviolent offenses, bail practices should be reformed to be more accessible, and all police, judges, and lawyers must participate in ongoing bias evaluation and training”) and the whole essay is used to maintain a strong focus on defending it.



Support and Evidence

The essay demonstrates thorough reasoning and understanding of the topic, using the most relevant and valid evidence from multiple sources to develop its ideas and refute counterclaims (“However, Source 3 states that ‘most studies have not supported this concern’”).



Organization

Precise transitions (“If...then,” “Unquestionably,” “Thus”) clarify relationships between ideas in a way that strengthens the argument. An effective introduction, clear topic sentences, and a full conclusion support a logical progression of ideas.



Language

The essay demonstrates a definitive voice (“It is fair to say that everyone is a product of their experiences...”) and a clear command of conventions. Vivid word choice (“reevaluated,” “alarming fact,” “disadvantage”) and a consistently formal style attends to the reader’s interests.



Using Exemplars in Your Lessons

Exemplar essays are tools to take abstract descriptions and make them more concrete for students. One way to use them is to print the clean copies of the essays and allow students to use the rubric to make notes or even find examples of important elements of an essay - thesis statements, introductions, evidence, conclusions, transitions, etc. Teachers can also use exemplars to illustrate what each score point within a trait ‘looks like’ in an authentic student essay. For additional ideas, please see “25 Ways to Use Exemplar Essays” by visiting the Curriculum Resources page in Help.

Criminal Justice Reform



Reform the Causes of Inequity

To the staff of Senator Casey,

The criminal justice system in the United States of America should be fair and equitable for all of its citizens. Whether on the street or in the courtroom, people suspected of crime, especially people of color, have little protections from the police, lawyers, and judges who may be prejudiced against them. Even innocent people can experience violence, arrest, and unnecessary jail time due to unfair treatment by those who are supposed to be protecting them. Significant changes must occur in the hiring, training, and evaluation of police, lawyers, and judges to address the unequal treatment that people of color face. Furthermore, the practices surrounding how bail and prison sentences are determined must be reevaluated to ensure fair treatment for all. In order to make America's criminal justice system fair and equitable for everyone, mandatory minimum sentences must be eliminated for nonviolent offenses, bail practices should be reformed to be more accessible, and all police, judges, and lawyers must participate in ongoing bias evaluation and training.

Taxpayers are responsible for the cost of housing approximately two million prisoners in the United States, spending an estimated \$35,000 annually per inmate (Source 1). Therefore, it is in the best interest of American citizens for Congress to minimize who needs to be in prison and why. While prison may be appropriate for violent criminals, mandatory minimum sentences require lengthy and unnecessary jail time for people convicted of nonviolent offenses. According to Source 1, "people who commit nonviolent crimes are given the same sentences as those who have

used violence." Additionally, the "three strikes law" forces anyone convicted of three felonies to a life sentence in prison, even if those offenses were not violent (Source 1). If a mandatory prison sentence is meant to protect citizens from the harmful actions of a criminal, then this hardly seems fair to nonviolent offenders. Unquestionably, mandatory minimum sentences cost taxpayers billions of dollars each year. According to Source 2, less costly, more appropriate alternatives to prison should be offered to nonviolent offenders, "such as drug counseling or job training" (Source 2). Mandatory minimum sentencing should be eliminated as a requirement, allowing judges to determine more appropriate alternatives to prison time.

Another practice that allows for unequal treatment in the courtroom is the issuing of bail. When a person is arrested and appears at their hearing, the judge decides whether or not to allow the person to post bail (and how much that bail should be) so they can return home until their official court date. If the defendant is unable to pay the bail amount, or the judge decides to deny bail entirely, then that person must sit in jail, often for several months, until their trial starts. This means that they cannot work or see their family and will almost certainly lose their jobs and housing as a result. Consider the impact a judge with prejudices can have on the lives of people arrested for crimes, especially crimes of which they may be innocent.

Some critics of bail reform argue that there will be a spike in criminal behavior and defendants won't return to court for their trials if bail is eliminated altogether. This feels like a valid concern, especially for people who are guilty of violent crimes. However, Source 3 states that "most studies have not supported this concern. Even without bail, most people show up for their trial date and most people do not commit new crimes while waiting for trial." Surprisingly, Source 3 also reports the alarming fact that "statistics show that if you have to wait for your trial in jail, you're more likely to be convicted of the crimes you're accused of" (Source 3). Because of this, it is clear that the bail system in the United States unfairly puts people with lower incomes and

people of color at a disadvantage. To make the system more equitable, bail should be reformed so that all people arrested for nonviolent crimes have access to reasonable, achievable bail amounts. The bail could be related to their income level so that biased judges can't set unreasonably high amounts for some defendants and not others.

Reforming the practices of mandatory minimum sentencing and bail are necessary steps to addressing the structural racism that exists in the criminal justice system (Source 3). However, reform policies must go further. They need to focus on why some police officers, lawyers, and judges treat people of color unfairly. In other words, reform policies "must also attempt to fix the basic issues of who gets arrested and why" and who faces unequal sentencing and bail orders and why (Source 2). It is fair to say that everyone is a product of their experiences, and those experiences shape their beliefs and how they interact with other people. Thus, everyone would benefit from exploring what their biases are and how they impact their feelings, actions, and reactions that result from those inner beliefs. This is especially true for anyone in a position of power, and it can't be denied that police, lawyers, and judges have an enormous amount of power over other people's lives. Therefore, it is the responsibility of our government to make sure that the people in positions of power not only participate in courses that explore these issues, but to evaluate their performance regularly and remove those who repeatedly act with prejudice and bias. With these changes, the criminal justice system will be taking active steps toward more equitable treatment for all.

In summary, the criminal justice system should treat everyone equally regardless of their race or income status. Through the elimination of mandatory minimum sentences, the reform of bail to be more accessible, and the required participation of all police, lawyers, and judges in bias training and evaluations, the system will begin to address the inequitable treatment that people of color and people with limited incomes have faced for far too long.