

114TH CONGRESS
1ST SESSION

H. R. 3489

To eliminate mandatory minimum sentences for all drug offenses.

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SEPTEMBER 10, 2015

Ms. MAXINE WATERS of California (for herself, Mr. ELLISON, Mr. POCAN, Mrs. WATSON COLEMAN, Ms. LEE, Ms. NORTON, Mr. BRADY of Pennsylvania, and Mr. GRIJALVA) introduced the following bill; which was referred to the Committee on the Judiciary, and in addition to the Committee on Energy and Commerce, for a period to be subsequently determined by the Speaker, in each case for consideration of such provisions as fall within the jurisdiction of the committee concerned

A BILL

To eliminate mandatory minimum sentences for all drug offenses.

1 *Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representa-*
2 *tives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,*

3 **SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.**

4 This Act may be cited as the “Mandatory Minimum
5 Reform Act of 2015”.

6 **SEC. 2. FINDINGS.**

7 Congress makes the following findings:

1 (1) Mandatory minimum sentences are statu-
2 torily prescribed terms of imprisonment that auto-
3 matically attach upon conviction of certain criminal
4 conduct, usually pertaining to drug or firearm of-
5 fenses. Absent very narrow criteria for relief, a sen-
6 tencing judge is powerless to mandate a term of im-
7 prisonment below the mandatory minimum. Manda-
8 tory minimum sentences for drug offenses rely solely
9 upon the weight of the substance as a proxy for the
10 degree of involvement of a defendant's role.

11 (2) In the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, and
12 at the height of the public outcry over crack cocaine,
13 Congress acted hastily, without sufficient hearings,
14 and enacted hard-line penalties that targeted low-
15 level drug offenders. These penalties included new,
16 long mandatory minimum sentences for such offend-
17 ers.

18 (3) According to the Bureau of Prisons, in
19 1986, when the new drug law containing lengthy
20 mandatory minimum sentences passed, the prison
21 population was 36,000. Today, the Federal prison
22 population is over 210,000 prisoners, up almost 600
23 percent in 29 years.

1 (4) According to the Bureau of Prisons, the av-
2 erage cost to keep one prisoner in Federal prison for
3 one year is approximately \$29,000.

4 (5) According to the Office of Management and
5 Budget, annual spending on the Federal prison sys-
6 tem rose 595 percent, from \$970,000,000 to more
7 than \$6.7 billion in inflation-adjusted dollars, be-
8 tween 1980 and 2013.

9 (6) According to the U.S. Sentencing Commis-
10 sion, between 1995 and 2010, over 400,000 drug of-
11 fenders were sentenced under Federal law; of these,
12 almost 250,000 (61 percent) received mandatory
13 minimum sentences.

14 (7) According to the U.S. Sentencing Commis-
15 sion, drug offenders released from prison in 1986
16 who had been sentenced before the adoption of man-
17 datory sentences and sentencing guidelines had
18 served an average of 22 months in prison. In 2013,
19 almost two-thirds of all drug offenders received a
20 mandatory sentence, with most receiving a 10-year
21 minimum. Most of these offenders are nonviolent or
22 lower-level offenders with little or no criminal his-
23 tory: in 2013, 49.6 percent had few or no prior con-
24 victions, 83.8 percent did not have weapons involved

1 in their offense, and only 7 percent were considered
2 leaders, managers, or supervisors of drug operations.

3 (8) Mandatory minimum sentences have con-
4 sistently been shown to have a disproportionate im-
5 pact on African-Americans. The United States Sen-
6 tencing Commission, in a 15-year overview of the
7 Federal sentencing system, concluded that “manda-
8 tory penalty statutes are used inconsistently” and
9 disproportionately affect African-American defend-
10 ants. African-American drug defendants are 20-per-
11 cent more likely to be sentenced to prison than
12 White drug defendants.

13 (9) According to the U.S. Sentencing Commis-
14 sion, between 1994 and 2003, the average time
15 served by African-Americans for a drug offense in-
16 creased by 62 percent, compared to a 17-percent in-
17 crease among White drug defendants.

18 (10) According to the Substance Abuse and
19 Mental Health Services Administration, Government
20 surveys document that drug use is roughly con-
21 sistent across racial and ethnic groups. While there
22 is less data available regarding drug sellers, research
23 from the Office of National Drug Control Policy and
24 the National Institute of Justice has found that
25 drug users generally buy drugs from someone of

1 their own racial or ethnic background. But, accord-
2 ing to the U.S. Sentencing Commission, over 70 per-
3 cent of all Federal narcotics offenders sentenced
4 each year are African-Americans and Hispanic-
5 Americans, many of whom are low-level offenders.

6 (11) As a result of Federal prosecutors' focus
7 on low-level drug offenders, the overwhelming major-
8 ity of individuals subject to the heightened crack co-
9 caine penalties are African-American. According to
10 the U.S. Sentencing Commission's 2007 Report to
11 Congress on crack cocaine, only 8.8 percent of Fed-
12 eral crack cocaine convictions were imposed on
13 White Americans, while 81.8 percent and 8.4 per-
14 cent were imposed on African-American and His-
15 panics, respectively.

16 (12) According to the U.S. Census, African-
17 Americans comprise 12 percent of the U.S. popu-
18 lation and, according to the Substance Abuse and
19 Mental Health Services Administration, about 10
20 percent of all drug users, but almost 26.5 percent of
21 all Federal drug convictions according to the U.S.
22 Sentencing Commission.

23 (13) According to the U.S. Sentencing Commis-
24 sion, African-Americans, on average, now serve al-
25 most as much time in Federal prison for a drug of-

1 fense (58.7 months) as Whites do for a violent of-
2 fense (61.7 months).

3 (14) According to the U.S. Sentencing Commis-
4 sion, in 2013, almost 34 percent of women entering
5 Federal prison did so for a drug offense. Linking
6 drug quantity with punishment severity has had a
7 particularly profound impact on women, who are
8 more likely to play peripheral roles in a drug enter-
9 prise than men. However, because prosecutors can
10 attach drug quantities to an individual regardless of
11 the level of a defendant's participation in the
12 charged offense, women have been exposed to in-
13 creasingly punitive sentences to incarceration.

14 (15) Low-level and mid-level drug offenders can
15 be adequately prosecuted by the States and punished
16 or supervised in treatment as appropriate.

17 (16) The Departments of Justice, the Treasury,
18 and Homeland Security are the agencies with the
19 greatest capacity to investigate, prosecute and dis-
20 mantle the highest level of drug trafficking organiza-
21 tions. Low-level drug offender investigations and
22 prosecutions divert Federal personnel and resources
23 from prosecuting high-level traffickers.

24 (17) Congress must have the most current in-
25 formation on the number of prosecutions of high-

1 level and low-level drug offenders in order to prop-
2 erly reauthorize Federal drug enforcement programs.

3 (18) Congress has an obligation to taxpayers to
4 use sentencing policies that are cost-effective and in-
5 crease public safety, in addition to establishing a
6 criminal justice system that is fair, efficient and pro-
7 vides just sentences for offenders. Mandatory sen-
8 tences have not been conclusively shown to reduce
9 recidivism or deter crime.

10 (19) Prisons are important and expensive; the
11 limited resources in the Federal criminal justice sys-
12 tem should be used to protect society by incapaciti-
13 ating dangerous and violent offenders who pose a
14 threat to public safety. The Federal judiciary has
15 the expertise and is in the best position to sentence
16 each offender and determine who should be sent to
17 Federal prisons and the amount of time each of-
18 fender should serve.

19 **SEC. 3. APPROVAL OF CERTAIN PROSECUTIONS BY ATTOR-**
20 **NEY GENERAL.**

21 A Federal prosecution for an offense under the Con-
22 trolled Substances Act, the Controlled Substances Import
23 and Export Act, or for any conspiracy to commit such an
24 offense, where the offense involves the illegal distribution
25 or possession of a controlled substance in an amount less

1 than that amount specified as a minimum for an offense
2 under section 401(b)(1)(A) of the Controlled Substances
3 Act (21 U.S.C. 841(b)(1)(A)) or, in the case of any sub-
4 stance containing cocaine or cocaine base, in an amount
5 less than 500 grams, shall not be commenced without the
6 prior written approval of the Attorney General.

7 **SEC. 4. MODIFICATION OF CERTAIN SENTENCING PROVI-**
8 **SIONS.**

9 (a) SECTION 404.—Section 404(a) of the Controlled
10 Substances Act (21 U.S.C. 844(a)) is amended—

11 (1) by striking “not less than 15 days but”;

12 (2) by striking “not less than 90 days but”;

13 and

14 (3) by striking the sentence beginning “The im-
15 position or execution of a minimum sentence”.

16 (b) SECTION 401.—Section 401(b) of the Controlled
17 Substances Act (21 U.S.C. 841(b)) is amended—

18 (1) in paragraph (1)(A)—

19 (A) by striking “which may not be less
20 than 10 years and or more than” and inserting
21 “for any term of years or for”;

22 (B) by striking “and if death” the first
23 place it appears and all that follows through
24 “20 years or more than life” the first place it
25 appears;

1 (C) by striking “which may not be less
2 than 20 years and not more than life imprison-
3 ment and if death or serious bodily injury re-
4 sults from the use of such substance shall be
5 sentenced to imprisonment for any term of
6 years or for life imprisonment” and inserting
7 “for any term of years or for life”;

8 (D) by striking the sentence beginning “If
9 any person commits a violation of this subpara-
10 graph”; and

11 (E) by striking the sentence beginning
12 “Notwithstanding any other provision of law”
13 and the sentence beginning “No person sen-
14 tenced”;

15 (2) in paragraph (1)(B)—

16 (A) by striking “which may not be less
17 than 5 years and not more than 40 years and
18 if death or serious bodily injury results from
19 the use of such substance shall be not less than
20 20 years or more than life,” and inserting “for
21 not more than 40 years,”;

22 (B) by striking “which may not be less
23 than 10 years and more than” and inserting
24 “for any term of years or for”;

1 (C) by inserting “imprisonment for any
2 term of years or to” after “if death or serious
3 bodily injury results from the use of such sub-
4 stance shall be sentenced to”; and

5 (D) by striking the sentence beginning
6 “Notwithstanding any other provision of law”
7 and the sentence beginning “No person sen-
8 tenced”; and

9 (3) in paragraph (1)(C), by striking “and if
10 death or serious bodily injury results from the use
11 of such substance shall be sentenced to a term of
12 imprisonment of not less than twenty years or more
13 than life”.

14 (c) SECTION 1010.—Section 1010(b) of the Con-
15 trolled Substances Import and Export Act (21 U.S.C.
16 960(b)) is amended—

17 (1) in paragraph (1)—

18 (A) by striking “of not less than 10 years
19 and not more than” and inserting “for any
20 term of years or for”;

21 (B) by striking “and if death” the first
22 place it appears and all that follows through
23 “20 years and not more than life” the first
24 place it appears;

1 (C) by striking “of not less than 20 years
2 and not more than life imprisonment” and in-
3 serting “for any term of years or for life”;

4 (D) by inserting “imprisonment for any
5 term of years or to” after “if death or serious
6 bodily injury results from the use of such sub-
7 stance shall be sentenced to”; and

8 (E) by striking the sentence beginning
9 “Notwithstanding any other provision of law”
10 and the sentence beginning “No person sen-
11 tenced”;

12 (2) in paragraph (2)—

13 (A) by striking “not less than 5 years
14 and”;

15 (B) by striking “of not less than twenty
16 years and not more than” and inserting “for
17 any term of years or for”;

18 (C) by striking “of not less than 10 years
19 and not more than” and inserting “for any
20 term of years or to”;

21 (D) by inserting “imprisonment for any
22 term of years or to” after “if death or serious
23 bodily injury results from the use of such sub-
24 stance shall be sentenced to”; and

1 (E) by striking the sentence beginning
2 “Notwithstanding any other provision of law”
3 and the sentence beginning “No person sen-
4 tenced”; and

5 (3) in paragraph (3), by striking “and if death
6 or serious bodily injury results from the use of such
7 substance shall be sentenced to a term of imprison-
8 ment of not less than twenty years”.

9 (d) SECTION 418.—Section 418 of the Controlled
10 Substances Act (21 U.S.C. 859) is amended by striking
11 the sentence beginning “Except to the extent” each place
12 it appears and by striking the sentence beginning “The
13 mandatory minimum”.

14 (e) SECTION 419.—Section 419 of the Controlled
15 Substances Act (21 U.S.C. 860) is amended—

16 (1) by striking the sentence beginning “Except
17 to the extent” each place it appears and by striking
18 the sentence beginning “The mandatory minimum”;
19 and

20 (2) by striking subsection (d).

21 (f) SECTION 420.—Section 420 of the Controlled
22 Substances Act (21 U.S.C. 861) is amended—

23 (1) in each of subsections (b) and (c), by strik-
24 ing the sentence beginning “Except to the extent”;

25 (2) by striking subsection (e); and

- 1 (3) in subsection (f), by striking “, (c), and (e)”
- 2 and inserting “and (c)”.

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