



Written Testimony  
House Judiciary Committee  
Re: Justice Reinvestment Act  
House Bills 5063, 5064, 5065, 5115, 5117 and 5128  
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Submitted by The Rhode Island Interfaith Coalition to Reduce Poverty

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The RI Interfaith Coalition to Reduce Poverty is writing to express its support for the Justice Reinvestment Act, a collection of bills designed to address challenges in RI's criminal justice system, with special concern for issues of probation reform.

Rhode Island's probation system is excessively burdensome. More than 23,000 Rhode Islanders are on probation. Not only are a higher percentage of people on probation than in most states; they are also on probation for about three times longer than the national average. Additionally, RI's probation system has a disproportionate negative impact on communities of color, with an astonishing one in six black men on probation. For many individuals, the weight of probation remains heavy, while that level of supervision is not actually needed to maintain public safety. Appropriate assessment and prioritization is not always possible in the current system. Excessive, unnecessary interactions with the criminal justice system negatively impact communities living in poverty, further impoverishing both families and communities.

The work of Michelle Alexander provides some context, on a national level:

[O]f the nearly 7.3 million people currently under correctional control, only 1.6 million are in prison. This caste system extends far beyond prison walls and governs millions of people who are on probation and parole, primarily for nonviolent offenses. They have been swept into the system, branded criminals or felons, and ushered into a permanent second-class status – acquiring records that will follow them for life. Probationers are the clear majority of those who are under community supervision (84 percent), and only 19 percent of them were convicted of a violent offense. (*The New Jim Crow*, New York: The New Press, 2012, page 101-102)

The proposed legislation allows for some positive revisions to the state's criminal justice system, including diversion opportunities that more appropriately address the mental health needs of arrested people, revised probation and parole processes to be more strongly assessment- and evidence-based, and additional support for crime victims. We support passage of this legislation.