

MARYLAND ALLIANCE FOR JUSTICE REFORM

Working to end unnecessary incarceration and build strong, safe communities



Ending DIM hopes for Marylanders in prison or making better choices?

Reportedly, Baltimore's Mayor Brandon Scott and State's Attorney Ivan Bates, facing an election year and adverse headlines over the City's crime rate, may propose a risky new tactic in 2024.

They may call for legislation to cancel incentives known as "diminution" or "DIM" credits. These credits help a cooperative prisoner earn an earlier release date. Removing these credits would make the time served on Maryland prison sentences increase by a small percentage.

Eliminating DIM credits is a truly bad idea. Why?

- First, the existing DIM credit system *already* treats violent offenders more harshly than others. It drastically reduces the credits toward sentence reduction that violent offenders and drug dealers can earn in the first place. The current system also allows corrections authorities to cancel part or all of a Maryland prisoner's "good conduct" or other special DIM credits for even a single incident of bad behavior.
- Second, as David Blumberg, long-serving chair of Maryland's Parole Commission, has recognized, rewarding good behavior "lowers the threat of violence on our prison staff."
- Third, the DIM proposal would do nothing to reduce our state's crime rate.

Only a few years ago, Maryland's own examination of criminological principles found that "adding months and years onto prison stays has little or no impact on recidivism." (See the 2015 final report of the Maryland Justice Reinvestment Coordinating Council [JRCC], available online.) More importantly, the JRCC found that "[r]esearch demonstrates that providing incentives like earned time or diminution credits in prison can reduce recidivism and save taxpayer dollars."

In other words, taking away hope and incentive for good behavior from Marylanders behind bars wouldn't make us safer. It would just make our prisons more crowded, more dangerous for correctional officers, and more costly for taxpayers.

Many proven strategies actually can reduce Maryland's crime rates. In addition to good behavior incentives, the JRCC also urged legislators to adopt evidence-based practices such as the following:

- Treatment for large categories of offenders outside of prisons and jails. These categories include drug offenders, mental health patients, nonviolent offenders, and most parole or probation violators. Both the Mayor and State’s Attorney should actively support such programs. Effective treatment can change behavior and reduce the possibility of new offenses.
- Ensuring that police, prosecutors and courts all recognize, as Drug Courts do, that what deters crime best are “swift and certain [sanctions] rather than those ... delayed and inconsistently applied, no matter how severe.” Prosecutor Bates could offer incentives to expedite cases for appropriate offenders.
- When young adults are sent to prisons, the prisons must treat them humanely and provide good education and job training for each one. Other states do this more effectively and reduce their recidivism rates.
- Last but not least, we must expand reentry support and add transition coordinators for the 95% of prisoners who will return to our communities. Help is needed with “housing, employment, treatment, and family reintegration.” When our returning citizens re-offend, most often because of problems with one or more of these fundamentals, it happens most often within the first few months. So, these resources can work best if front-loaded.

One last observation for Baltimore City’s candidates: The glass is half full. The Mayor’s own Baltimore Public Safety Accountability Dashboard shows violent crimes trending down in the past year. This includes murders, carjacking, rapes, burglaries and aggravated assaults. In 2023 the murder rate dropped below 300 for the first time since 2015.

The most dramatic increase is an anomaly. Car thefts by young people, especially of Hyundai and Kias, exploded – up 166%, effective last month. Baltimore’s leaders can take credit for the numerous clinics established by makers of these cars to distribute free security upgrades and anti-theft devices.

In conclusion, all our elected officials should be encouraged to make our criminal justice system become more effective, not just more harsh. Removing the DIM hopes of Marylanders in prison doesn’t prevent crime and wouldn’t help rehabilitation. However, there are proven strategies that can help.

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