

Parlaying the Prison Experience

NuLeadership, a think tank staffed with formerly incarcerated researchers, lobbies for ex-prisoners to have a say in criminal justice policymaking.

BY KATTI GRAY

At the close of almost 25 years of winding through New York state's prisons, former Black Panther Eddie Ellis walked away in 1994 with four college degrees he earned while incarcerated and kept treading his singular path as an activist on the issues of police, courts, crime and punishment. As he had done in prison, he organized felons and former felons. He conducted community workshops, lectured and lobbied. In 2000, before conferees who, except for him, were White criminologists and law enforcement officials, Ellis dared to ask how, given the topics at hand, he was the solitary ex-prisoner and sole Black among the invited analysts.

"None of them, of course, (were) directly related to the Black and Latino communities, the substance-abuse communities, prison communities. So when it was my turn to speak, that had to be the first question I put on the table," says Ellis, 67, founder and executive director of the Center for NuLeadership on Urban Solutions. Housed the last five years at Medgar Evers College, the City University of New York's Brooklyn outpost, NuLeadership was officially christened an academic center by CUNY administrators in December.

Top: Inmates send mail to NuLeadership querying about its programs and sometimes seeking advice regarding the adjudication of their cases.

center by CUNY administrators in December. NuLeadership, the only think tank of its kind devoted to analyzing and helping rejigger a variegated U.S. system of justice, is staffed full time almost entirely by ex-prisoner researchers.

Its second tier of researchers comprise the NuLeadership Policy Group, a nationwide complement of what its administrators count thus far as 300 ex-prisoners of a certain profile: Each must have



been out of prison at least five years. Each has publicly stated the reasons they landed behind bars. Each holds at least a bachelor's degree. Each is an executive in an organization addressing head-on the policymaking aspects of adjudicating crime. Equally to the point, they are helping shape policies surrounding the re-entry of ex-prisoners into nonprison life. Annually, roughly 700,000 people across the country are returning to their home communities of

Medgar Evers student Eloni Blake, who plans to major in criminal justice, helps maintain NuLeadership's data bank and has incarcerated and formerly incarcerated family members.

mainly minorities and poor people. NuLeadership and like-minded policymakers contend these ex-prisoners should have some say in the methods and mechanisms involved in that

return.

"When criminal justice policymaking happens, it's important that the formerly incarcerated are an essential part of the discussion. It adds a certain cultural competency to that discussion," says Glenn Martin, 38, vice president for development and director of the David Rothenberg Center for Public Policy at the Fortune Society, a New York project fixed on post-prison re-entry and alternatives to incarceration, particularly for nonviolent crimes.

He was born in Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood and was criminal from the time he was a teen until an armed robbery conviction brought him six years at Attica. There, through a



Locked Out

State budget cuts crippling support for prison education programs throughout the U.S.

BY GARRY BOULARD

As a collaborative program bringing the instructional resources of Wesleyan University to the maximum security Cheshire Correctional Institute in Connecticut enters its second semester, prison and higher education experts are seeing decreasing support for similar programs across the country.

"Whatever backing, which was never substantial to begin with, such programs might have once received, it is generally less today," says Dr. Bob Roberts, the executive

director of Project Return, which was once housed on the campus of Tulane University but ended its prison education program in Louisiana after the state withdrew funding.

"It's unfortunate that this has become a national trend," says Dr. Nancy Rogers, the associate vice president of academic affairs at Indiana State University, which offers two- and four-year degree programs for inmates at five correctional institutes in Indiana. "The studies we've seen from our state Department of Corrections show

Wesleyan University uses its instructional resources to teach inmates at Cheshire Correctional Institute in Connecticut.

a significantly lower rate of recidivism among ex-inmates who have received a degree than with those who haven't. So if the goal is reducing crime, obviously prison education programs have to be regarded as productive."

But they are also regarded as expendable for many states entering the second fiscal year of a stubborn national recession.

"Prison education programs in California have greatly been victim to a larger corrections cost-cutting effort," says Karen Humphrey, the executive director of the California Postsecondary Education Com-

now moribund prison-based college study program, he earned a bachelor's degree in social science from Jesuit-run Canisius College in Buffalo, N.Y. Martin says engagement as a member of NuLeadership Policy Group is tantamount to a second job. "NuLeadership demands extra time out of my schedule. But it brings an incredible value to my work and affords me a certain type of credibility among my constituents," says Martin, who left prison about nine years ago.

NuLeadership already has calculated the impact of such recent legislative initiatives as a proposed ratcheting up of federal laws against gangsters and gang violence. NuLeadership also was part of a coalition that championed reversal of the extra-punitive Rockefeller Drug Laws and the enactment of prison health care reforms. The research at NuLeadership is three-pronged:

- The impact of parole on those who've received the longest prison sentences; their rates of recidivism; and the dangers that violent offenders, particularly, pose to communities they reinhabit upon parole
- Gaps between available social services and other re-entry services and the tally of returning ex-prisoners who can access them and those who can and/or do not
- The financial, emotional and psychological costs to families when members of their households are incarcerated. (Along with that, the impact of a members' absences on labor markets; the impact of absentee fatherhood on Black and brown communities that con-

mission.

In his most recent budget, California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has called for reducing the state's prison education program by \$250 million. According to the Washington State Institute for Public Policy, the cut will leave California with the smallest per capita prison education program funding? in the country. Can you elaborate? What does that mean -- \$200 per prisoner compared to what?

But in the face of such trends, the Wesleyan Center for Prison Education received a near \$300,000 grant from the Bard Prison Initiative, what is the bard prison initiative? which reports an about 45 percent recidivism drop in the U.S. among inmates who have participated in prison education offerings over the last 20-plus years.

"This is actually a two-year pilot program," says Cathy Crimmins Lechowicz, program manager of the center who has spearheaded an education outreach for 18 Cheshire inmates taking courses in sociology and English essay writing last semester and nonlab chemistry and introduction to government courses this semester. "Our hope is that the inmates — since we are a liberal arts institution — will really be able to experience the range of liberal arts."

Lechowicz says even though Wesleyan's prison courses have proven popular among

the inmates, the program's future may depend on whether additional funding can be secured.

"As it stands now, we really don't know what is going to happen," she says. "Obviously, we are willing to explore any route that might give us support."

In Indiana, prison education courses offered by ISU are contracted out by the state's Department of Corrections (IDOC). Due to a recent restructuring of the department's education offerings, Ivy Tech Community College will provide GED, literary and vocational education to inmates, while the university will continue to offer two- and four-year degree programs.

Such programs have remained operational in Indiana, says corrections department spokesman Doug Garrison, because lawmakers like the lower recidivism rates they produce.

"They are seen as being very beneficial in that regard," he says.

According to IDOC data, the state's overall recidivism rate dropped from 37.8 in 2007 to 37.4 percent in 2008, marking the third consecutive year the rate declined. But for former inmates with college degrees that rate drops to 21.2 percent.

Similar patterns have also impressed legislators in California, where the recidivism rate among released inmates who had par-

ticipated in prison education programs at one institution—Ironwood State Prison—was 20 percent, compared with 70 percent for the general prison population.

"That proves that these programs have a positive and lasting impact," says Vicki Ataway, the associate dean of distance learning and noncredit programs at Palo Verde College in Blythe, Calif. Palo Verde offers prison education programs to more than 1,000 inmates at 23 correctional institutions in California.

Even though California reduced may reduce? spending on such efforts, Schwarzenegger may have opened the door to more prison education with his proposal to up the budget for the state's higher education system from 7.5 percent to a guaranteed 10 percent by constitutional amendment. Schwarzenegger has also called for reducing California's prison budget from 11 to 7 percent.

"Everyone here is talking about it," says Humphrey. "If the proposal becomes reality, this may result in less prison education programs because the corrections budget will be cut. But the irony is that the state could end up with even more prison education programs than before if the colleges and universities that are interested and supportive of such programs see their budgets increased." ▣



Chino Hardin, a NuLeadership field coordinator, considers NuLeadership's research as a tool to inform the community how to make better decisions.

tribute disproportionately to the prison population; and trends in gang-related activity that can be linked to rates of incarceration.)

In addition to those long-term studies, NuLeadership— its analyses of existing research has been published in journals such as those of the Columbia University School of Law and the National Legal Aid & Defender Association— is investigating and challenging U.S. Census protocols that count prisoners as residents of communities where they are imprisoned, rather than neighborhoods from which they hail originally. (Several congressional districts in New York exist largely due to the rural prison populations.) Given that the census data dictate disbursement of federal funds, attorney Peter Wagner, executive director of the Northampton, Mass.-based Prison Policy Initiative, considers NuLeadership's foray into that area crucial.

"It has national repercussions," says Wagner, a regular commentator on Ellis' Saturday Pacifica Radio broadcast, *On the Count: The Prison & Criminal Justice Report*. They met while at the Soros Foundation, where Wagner was a criminal justice fellow and Ellis a consultant.

Adding Value

In 2002, Soros' program officers granted Ellis \$250,000 to identify others across the country who Ellis insisted matched his own profile as a formerly incarcerated activist of color and whom he believed should be parties in criminal justice policy debates.

"This issue of race — and of who's allowed at the table — is pervasive," says Dr. Divine Pryor, 49, the center's deputy executive director. "Some have tried to say we cannot produce credible research because we're formerly incarcerated and, therefore, cannot be objective. Because we are formerly incarcerated we have the most to gain by being totally objective, totally empirical."

Pryor was guilty, he says, of hijacking fur coats, jewelry and weapons from planes flying into New York and selling that cache

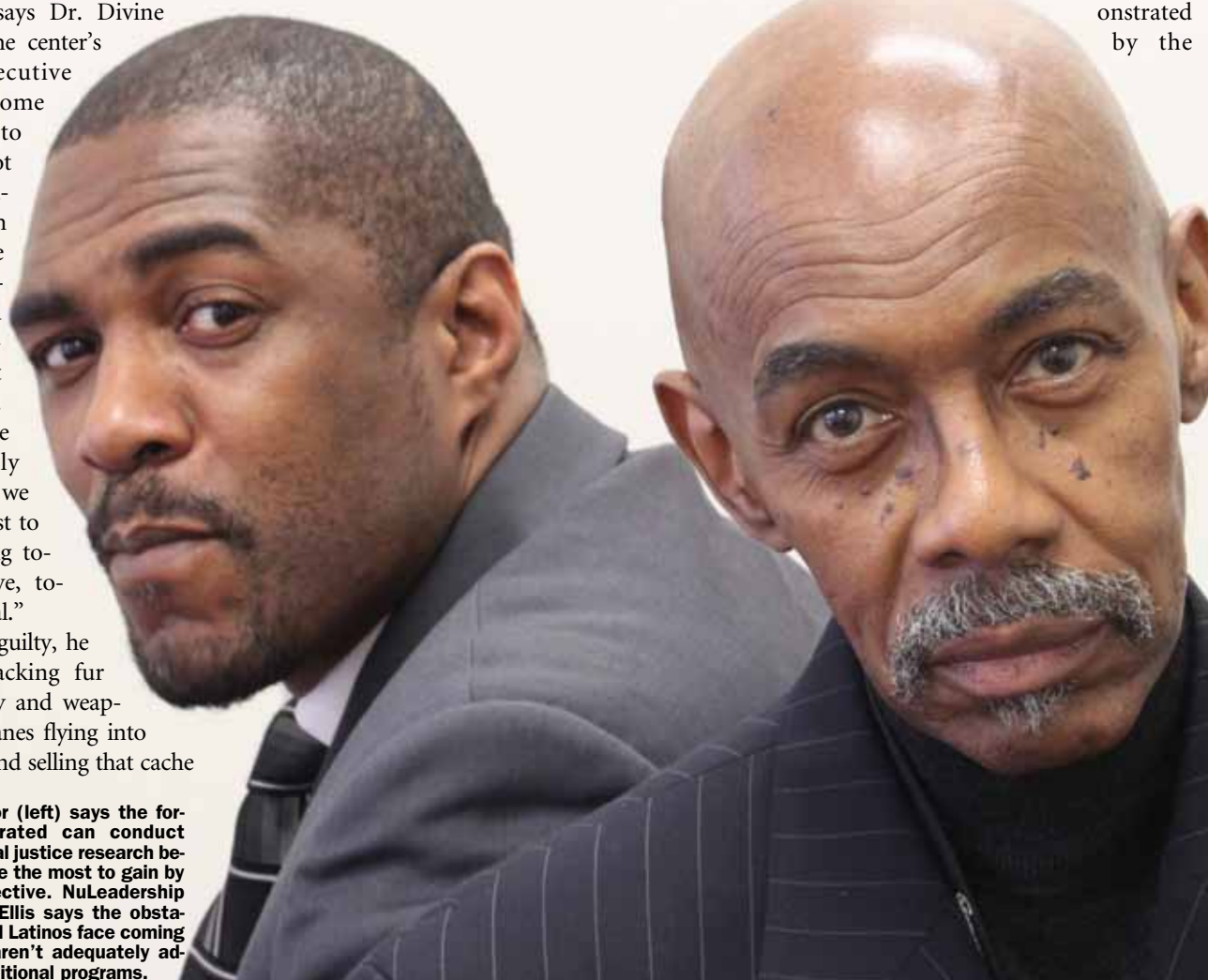
in exchange for narcotics and cash. New York state's various prisons held him for 20 years, during which he earned bachelor's and master's degrees in sociology and a doctorate in criminal justice from the State University of New York.

For his part, Ellis, whose highest degree is a Master's of Divinity from Union Theological Seminary, was convicted in 1970 of murdering a man he says he neither knew nor saw in the flesh. Ellis says he did not kill the man. (The charges against him resulted from activities by the FBI's COINTELPRO or Counterintelligence Program, which, the courts eventually concluded, covertly and sometimes illegally, infiltrated groups such as the Black Panthers, NAACP and National Lawyers Guild.)

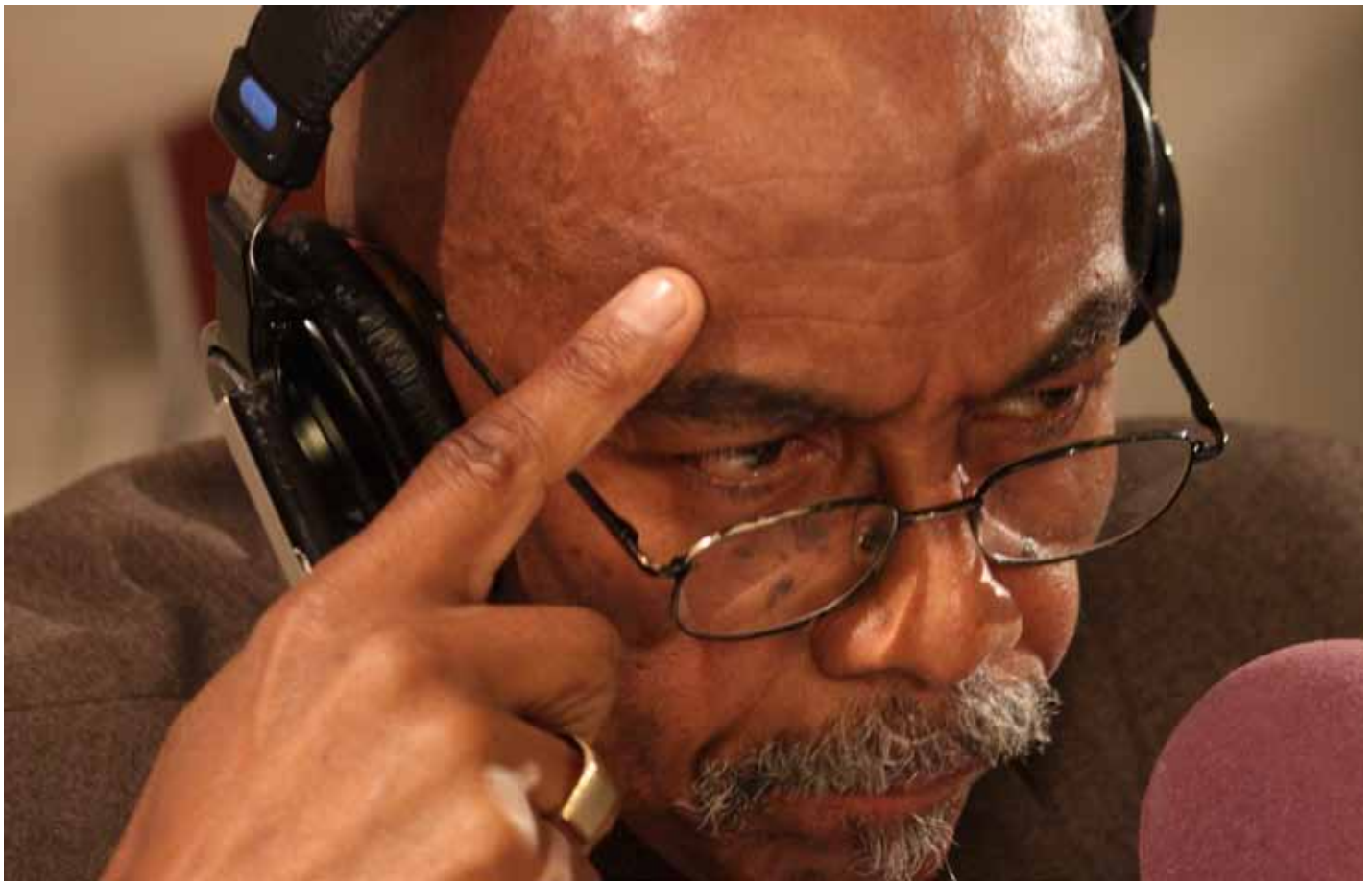
Ellis was present during 1971's pivotal inmate revolt at Attica. Prisoners protested such conditions as being allowed one shower per week and one roll of toilet paper a month. The riots gave rise to reform in New York state that trickled out to other locales. In addition to physical comforts, came other major changes. Among them was that combination of federal and state financing that paid for inmates to enroll in prison-based college programs and other groundbreaking endeavors. A swell of tough-on-crime measures in the mid-1990s terminated the bulk of those programs. And, yet, there is growing recognition by corrections chiefs in several states that those academics programs were far from folly.

"Overwhelmingly," says Ellis, who like Pryor, teaches at Medgar Evers on policing and the economics and politics of criminal justice, "it

has been demonstrated by the



Dr. Divine Pryor (left) says the formerly incarcerated can conduct credible criminal justice research because they have the most to gain by remaining objective. NuLeadership founder Eddie Ellis says the obstacles Blacks and Latinos face coming out of prison aren't adequately addressed by traditional programs.



research, the more education you have, the more likely you are, as a formerly incarcerated person, to have real prospects for advancing. Even in the face of that reality, the prison college programs have been eviscerated. There is a move on now to return that but even that is caught up in bipartisan rancor in Washington and the financial realities of this recession.”

Economic and political winds and whimsy notwithstanding, Ellis says, what NuLeadership — with its expanded network of 7,000 formerly incarcerated member-advocates who do not have the academic pedigree of those in the policy group — aims for is a steady reframing of who can and should be at the table as policy is drafted. While the circle of policymakers has continued to widen, the comparative lack of formerly incarcerated individuals and researchers of color lingers. And that has yielded, he argues, a one-size-fits-all approach to community re-entry that does not consider the lingering impacts of race and class. “Get an education. Take a bath three times a day and be respectful of authority. Be an example to your children and don’t beat your wife.’ That’s what, in this traditional model, has been said frequently to formerly incarcerated people as soon as

they get home. It sounds like I’m being facetious but it’s true,” Ellis says.

He cited a body of longitudinal research by, among others, Harvard University professor Dr. Bruce Western, formerly of Princeton University: “A white man with a criminal record has a greater chance of being hired in the New York labor market than a Black man with no record. This was tested ... I cite all of that to say that the obstacles that Blacks and Latinos coming out of prison face are real and not adequately addressed by traditional programs.”

Staying Informed

NuLeadership’s break with tradition is nuanced, right down to the language it chooses to employ. “Formerly incarcerated” is the researchers’ preferred descriptor. Ex-convict “applies to people who’ve been ex-communicated. It carries a connotation and denotation, incites a certain image in the public mind of individuals who are devoid of human-ness,” says Pryor, who’s also a consultant to the Kings County District Attorney’s Office in Brooklyn and the New York Police Department.

NuLeadership researcher Kyung Ji Kate Rhee, also director of the Institute for Juvenile Justice Reforms and Alternatives, a

Ellis hosts *On the Count: The Prison & Criminal Justice Report*, the only public affairs radio program in the U.S. exclusively produced by the formerly incarcerated, on Pacifica Radio in New York on Saturdays.

NuLeadership offshoot, said she and her cohorts are trying to redirect the criminal justice discourse by including affected communities in it, demanding more accountability on the part of communities and by doing incarceration costs analyses. For example, New York is one of two states—the other is North Carolina—where nonviolent 16-year-old defendants can be tried as adults. Rhee’s institute, which Ellis originally launched as the Prison Moratorium Project, began doing dollar-for-dollar comparisons in state construction expenditures on prisons and the decline in aid to public university students who, in the 1990s, were denouncing tuition hikes.

“It’s important to keep that information out there,” says Chino Hardin, 29, who as a NuLeadership field coordinator facilitates workshops and advocate training. Hardin was in and out of jail from ages 13 through 20. “Random things: Gang-related violence, assault, grand theft auto, possession of narcotics. I’m third-generation incarcerated. My mother was in jail for narcotics. My grandmother killed two husbands, bat-

terers, back before there was a term called battering. ... The qualitative work and the quantitative data are equally important. They are tools to inform the community how to make better decisions. How to make decisions, period, and to be a part of our own self-determination.”

Hardin, who spent almost 10 years as a trainer and organizer with the Prison Moratorium project, is studying for her GED and planning to enroll at Medgar Evers. She also grew up in Brooklyn, which harbors two of the seven New York neighborhoods whose residents, as of January 2009, accounted for more than 50 percent of New York state’s prison population, according to the Justice Department. Blacks and Latinos comprise roughly 77 percent of New York state’s prison population.

In 2008, the most recent year for which Justice Department figures are available, 556,900, or roughly 39 percent, of the nation’s roughly 1.43 million state and federal inmates were Black, while Blacks represent 12.8 percent of the nation’s population; 471,400 were white; and 301,200 were Hispanic, who represent 15.4 percent of the nation’s population.

Those numbers are not mere abstractions for NuLeadership’s Eloni Blake, 19, a Medgar Evers student who helps maintain the center’s data bank. “My dad is in prison now, my mom did time and my brothers are in and out of jail. It’s not that I’m sad about that, but I do feel very unfortunate at times,” says Blake, who plans to major in criminal justice and eventually do child advocacy.

NuLeadership, though underwritten by private philanthropists and government funders, has not been without its skeptics. The *New York Post* last year editorialized against a recent state grant to NuLeadership, questioning its prudence. That is precisely the divide over who should be a part of policymaking that Ellis and cohorts are hoping to bridge, “so that ultimately we can create a system that punishes those who break the law and, at the same time, provides them with what is necessary to reconstruct their lives and become law-abiding citizens,” he says. “All our research points to the wisdom of constructing this new approach to doing justice in America. We see it as a model for the way justice should be carried out.”

Seeking a Justice Reform Review

By Charles Dervarics

WASHINGTON – After nearly a year of inaction, a U.S. Senate panel has approved a comprehensive review of the nation’s criminal justice system, including issues such as the disproportionate share of minorities — particularly African-Americans — in U.S. prisons.

The action by the Senate Judiciary Committee sends the National Criminal Justice Commission Act to the full Senate for a vote later this year. Proposed by Sen.

Jim Webb, D-Va., the bill would authorize a blue-ribbon commission of experts who would undertake an 18-month review.

The U.S. has 5 percent of the world’s population but 25 percent of all those in prisons, Webb said. Those released from prison also face multiple barriers to re-entry with few support services, he adds.

The bill would not make any specific policy changes but would initiate a national review of policies toward incarceration, prisoner release, gangs, violent crime and other issues. The measure cleared the Senate committee with bipartisan support. The bill has not moved in the house.

“We are taking an inclusive, broad-based approach here, and I believe that’s the best way to move our country away from a system based on ideology and fear and toward what is fair and what keeps us safe,” said Webb, who introduced the measure last March. Before the Senate vote, the measure received endorsements from dozens of organizations including the Fraternal Order of Police and the International Association of Chiefs of Police.

At least one committee member said he was not abandoning a ‘get-tough’ stance on crime in voting for the measure.

“I believe strongly in securing tough and appropriate prison sentences for people who break our laws,” said Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., chairman of the Judiciary Committee. “But we must also work to prevent crime and improve the re-entry process to reverse the dangerous cycle of recidivism and violence.”

Webb said he has consulted with more than 100 organizations on the plan, including the NAACP, American Civil Liberties Union, CATO Institute, the Heritage Foundation and the Prison Fellowship.

In proposing the legislation, Webb noted the vast over-representation of African-Americans in the nation’s prisons. While African-Americans are 12 percent of the U.S. population, they represent 37 percent of those arrested for drugs, 54 percent of

those with convictions and 74 percent of those sentenced for drug offenses. In some cases, the issue may be securing appropriate legal representation, Webb said.

He also said it is appropriate to discuss fairness issues, particularly the rationale behind long prison terms many face for nonviolent offenses. While violent crime is down 32 percent since 1989, the prison population has “skyrocketed,” he said. In 1980, the U.S. had 41,000 drug offenders in prison; the number of such offenders in prison is now more than 500,000.

Among other issues, the commission would address topics such as:

- Gang violence
- Resources needed to fight violent crime
- Strategies to reduce incarceration
- The administration of prisons
- New or improved systems to integrate ex-offenders into society.

