

SENATE PASSES CRIMINAL JUSTICE REFORM BILL

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The U.S. Senate on Tuesday overwhelmingly passed the First Step Act, a criminal justice reform Bill, that would roll back what are seen as excessively punitive criminal justice policies that have been in place since the crackdown on crime in the 1980s.

The Bill, which had wide bipartisan support (only 12 Republicans voted against it), makes it easier for federal offenders to earn early release from prison, lowering mandatory federal sentences, expanding job training and other interventions to reduce recidivism.

The Bill benefits federally convicted individuals, mostly serving drug offences. Major reforms include reducing the disparity in how crack cocaine and powder cocaine offences are treated by federal law — the differential treatment of the types of cocaine offences tends to be harsher on African-American users. Some 2,000 federal offenders are likely to be impacted by this.

Second, the ‘three strikes’ rule, which mandated a life sentence for three drug felonies, will carry a reduced 25-year sentence. Judges will also get more room to circumvent mandatory minimum sentences and places restrictions on the practice of ‘stacking’ — where an offender could get decades extra in jail for committing an offence while also carrying a firearm.

Earned time

The Bill also retroactively decreases jail time for good behaviour and gives inmates “earned time” opportunities to be released to a halfway house or to be confined at home if they participate in rehabilitation and vocational courses. Undocumented immigrants and some classes of offenders are not eligible for these credits.

Criminal justice reform had started during the Obama administration and gained bipartisan support with evangelical and libertarian conservatives supporting it. The cause brought together unlikely allies from conservative donors like the Koch Brothers to the American Civil Liberties Union. The President’s son-in-law, Jared Kushner, whose father had served a 14-month sentence for witness tampering, tax evasion and illegal campaign finance, and celebrity Kim Kardashian were among those who brought President Donald Trump on board with the legislation.

But not all Republicans supported the Bill. Senator Tom Cotton of Arkansas, who at 41 is one of the youngsters in the Senate, decided to vote against it despite the Senate accepting his amendments, which included restrictions on who was eligible for earned time credits.

“We ultimately need to make far greater reforms if we are to right the wrongs that exist in our criminal justice system,” said Kamala Harris, Democratic Representative from California.

Mr. Trump, whose company, charities and campaign, are being investigated, seized the bipartisan moment, which is seen as a win for him and the Republicans.

“America is the greatest Country in the world and my job is to fight for ALL citizens, even those who have made mistakes. Congratulations to the Senate on the bi-partisan passing of a historic Criminal Justice Reform Bill,” he said on Twitter.

Leaders of the U.S. House said they expect the Bill to pass their chamber this week so President Trump can sign it into law.

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