

IN THE NEWS:

AG Jeff Sessions' Prison Policy Changes: Tougher Sentences, Private Prison Use

Overview:

- In the early weeks of the Trump administration, a rule put forth by the Obama Justice Department announcing the phasing out (and eventual end) of the use of private prisons, was overturned by incoming Attorney General Jeff Sessions.
- AG Sessions sent a memo out to federal prosecutors that informed them that as a matter of policy, they should pursue the “most serious, readily provable offense” for cases they work on.
- Sessions’ memo reverses a memo released under Obama’s AG, Eric Holder. Holder put forth a policy that encouraged prosecutors to change practice to avoid mandatory minimum sentences, be less aggressive on cases involving low-level, non-violent drug offenders, and instead focus on the most serious offenders.
- Sessions and supporters of his memo (which mirrors that of former AG John Ashcroft) say that the new AG’s policy is a return to law and order in American society, while opponents of the policy shift argue that it will result in overcrowded prisons and lives unnecessarily ruined.
- Complicating matters is the fact that Sessions has been slow to appoint replacement federal prosecutors (after ordering the resignation of Obama-appointed attorneys).

Required Reading:

- [Private Prisons: Here’s Why Sessions’ Memo Matters](#), NBC News
- [AG Sessions Orders Tougher Prison Sentences as the “Right and Moral Thing to Do,”](#) ABC
- [5 Years, or 20? How Sessions’ Get-Tough Order Would Extend Prison Stays](#), NY Times
- [A Plan to Put More Americans in Prison](#), The Economist
- [States Trim Penalties and Prison Rolls, Even as Sessions Gets Tough](#), NY Times
- [Want to End Mass Incarceration? Stop Blindly Reelecting Your Local Prosecutor](#), Vox (Op-Ed)
- [A Month After Dismissing Federal Prosecutors, Justice Department Does Not Have Any U.S. Attorneys in Place](#), Washington Post

Questions for discussion:

- Are the concepts of law and order and compassionate treatment for drug offenders at odds? How should government address these issues through policy?
- What populations in the United States are most impacted by AG Sessions’ policy shift?
- What would a drug and crime policy look like in the U.S. that considered historic issues of equity? Does the Sessions policy (or the Holder policy) match up with this design?
- How has the region you live in been impacted by prison policies? If it hasn’t been impacted, why do you think that is?
- What are the benefits and drawbacks of the use of private prisons in the U.S.?