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Trump isn't actually trying to reduce crime

BY ABDALLAH FAYYAD

Since he's returned to the White House, President Trump has said combating crime is one of his top priorities. He's portrayed American cities as out-of-control, crime-ridden "hellholes" in desperate need of federal intervention.

But despite Trump's law-and-

order campaign to "make America safe again," the president seems less interested in improving public safety than in using crime as a political weapon.

Here's just one example: Last April, the Department of Justice terminated at least \$40 million in grants that were intended to help people leaving prison find

housing, jobs, and health care. This funding has long had bipartisan support and was part of a law championed by George W. Bush called the Second Chance Act.

The reason these grants enjoyed such broad support is that reentry programs are critical in helping reduce recidivism rates — that is, the share of people who commit more crimes after leaving prison. For decades, research has consistently shown that formerly incarcerated people who have trouble finding housing or jobs are more likely to be rearrested.

So if the federal government is genuinely interested in bringing down the number of people who turn back to crime after

serving time in prison, then it would make sense to fund programs that help them adjust to life back in society. And yet the Trump administration has undermined such investments.

"Reentry policy, Second Chance Act, have been longtime bipartisan stalwarts in the field," says Ames Grawert, a senior counsel in the Brennan Center for Justice's Justice Program. "They have been really important areas of policy that have been broadly agreed upon by Republicans and Democrats alike. If you speak with many on the conservative side of the criminal justice reform field, many in Congress on the conservative side as well, they would agree ... that these policies mat-

ter to them and that these are ways to keep communities safe, make the justice system fairer and more effective."

What's especially surprising about the Justice Department's grant cuts is that they contradict priorities Trump laid out in his first term, when he signed the First Step Act into law in 2018. For all of its flaws, that law aimed to reduce the prison population and recidivism rates by promoting successful reentry programs. It also reauthorized the Second Chance Act's grant funding that the Trump administration has now scaled back.

The \$40 million budget cuts are part of the Justice Department's broader slashing of grants for services that aim to reduce violence and crime. In fact, according to the Council on Criminal Justice, the administration has terminated nearly 400 grants worth roughly \$500 million from the department's Office of Justice Programs.

A spokesperson for the Justice Department told me that the vast majority of cuts were for training and technical assistance awards, meaning that the grants went to nonprofit organizations that provided research and expertise to local institutions.

But experts say technical and training assistance from such nonprofits is critical to helping build effective prisoner reentry programs, especially in smaller towns with fewer resources. After all, these organizations offer law enforcement agencies and corrections departments guidance about best practices and how to tap into funding and grant opportunities.

One example in Massachusetts is UTEC, a violence intervention nonprofit that focuses on young people in Lowell, Lawrence, and Haverhill and has been affected by the Trump administration's grant cuts. "[Reentry] is a huge component of our work," says Gregg Croteau, UTEC's CEO. "Reentry has to start the first day you're incarcerated. So we get funding that al-

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lows us to be there, in the county jails ... and then we're also in the Department of Corrections." Since the cuts, Croteau says, the organization has had to put a freeze on certain positions and has leaned on other sources of funding — like philanthropy — to continue its core operations.

In addition to UTEC's programs that work directly with incarcerated youth behind jail walls, the organization also provides technical and training assistance programs. For example, it offers training sessions for correctional, probation, and police officers on working with young adults in the criminal justice system, particularly those in the 18-25 age range who require a specialized approach because studies have shown that they are still going through significant neurological development as they mature. This technical and training assistance work also builds networks of street workers or violence interrupters — that is, people who have had experiences similar to those of the young adults they're serving.

Another point of organizations like these is to ensure continuity of care for formerly incarcerated people so that upon leaving prison, they can get help finding housing, employment, and health care — all key factors that help reduce recidivism. These types of nonprofits "build organizational capacity over the long term," Amy Solomon, who

served as assistant attorney general of the Office of Justice Programs during the Biden administration, wrote in an op-ed in December.

Yet from the Justice Department's perspective, nonprofits such as these appear wasteful or examples of bureaucratic bloat. The DOJ spokesperson said that of the grants that were cut, only three went to direct reentry services, and one of those has been restored. The spokesperson also said that the rest of the grant funds will be funneled to direct reentry programs instead of technical and training assistance, but the DOJ did not respond to a follow-up about when that might happen.

One possibility is that the funds will be redirected to law enforcement. In a letter to Republican Senator Chuck Grassley of Iowa last year, the Justice Department wrote, "Notably, 93% of the terminations affect grants awarded to non-governmental entities — and not to states or local jurisdictions that directly serve our communities. The Department is committed to swiftly closing out the balance of the terminated grants and re-allocating available funds through new grants that more effectively support law enforcement operations and the Department's broader goals, consistent with President Trump's Executive Orders and applicable law."

But that strategy is incoherent and signals a haphazard approach to crime prevention. Law enforcement and direct reentry service programs rely on nonprofits for help with crime prevention tactics, including reentry programming, and without technical and training assistance, these public safety efforts are more likely to fail.

"There's nothing I see from this administration that shows they understand that nonprofits are a really important part of the public safety infrastructure," says Solomon, who is now a senior fellow at the Council on

Criminal Justice. "Police can't do this alone, and many in law enforcement will tell you that as well. ... If all the resources are going to law enforcement and immigration enforcement,

there's a lot of community infrastructure and community safety nets that are going to fall apart."

Coming up with policy solutions that reduce crime in the long run is notoriously difficult. It often takes time to determine what contributes to crime spikes and which interventions are best suited to addressing the root causes. Policy makers who want to see sustained success have to be very patient. But what the Trump administration is doing is the exact opposite — sabotaging time-tested policies that help reduce violence.

It's both bad optics and ineffective governance. If anything, the federal government should be investing more heavily in grants aimed at reducing crime in the long term.

"Around 95 percent of people in prison at any given point will one day leave prison, so the question is: In what state will they leave?" Grawert of the Brennan Center for Justice says. "We should want people to leave in a way where they can receive the training they need, receive the opportunities for jobs they need, receive the access to housing they need, so that they can have successful and promising lives after they leave prison. And federal support is a key part of helping make that happen."

Funding reentry programs and nonprofits that support them with technical and training assistance, in other words, is crucial to helping the formerly incarcerated contribute to their communities once they return home. But the Trump administration seems uninterested, at least as long as nonprofits are involved.

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