

## **A Statement of Support by the California Catholic Conference of Bishops for the California *Safe Neighborhoods and Schools Act* (Proposition 47)**

***“We will not tolerate the crime and violence that threatens the lives and dignity of our sisters and brothers, and we will not give up on those who have lost their way. We seek both justice and mercy. Working together, we believe our faith calls us to protect public safety, promote the common good, and restore community”<sup>i</sup>***

Despite years of effort, the criminal justice system in California remains desperately in need of significant reform. Victims are not receiving much needed assistance in healing, the State’s over-crowded prisons are under Federal scrutiny, and rehabilitation programs barely exist in the State’s prisons. An inconsistent patchwork of sentencing practices has been a major contributor to this unhealthy situation. So, too, failing schools and a woefully inadequate community mental health system are becoming merely preludes to prison. Incarceration does a miserable job of educating people and treating mental illness—but that has become the norm for California.

The *Safe Neighborhoods and Schools Act* (Proposition 47)<sup>ii</sup> will provide educational support and treat mental illness where it can yield the best results for the communities of California. Prop 47 will eliminate the disparities in sentencing for certain non-violent crimes. It addresses prison overcrowding and sentencing discrepancies in constructive ways, and uses the savings for victims’ assistance, mental health programs, public education, drug treatment, and inmate rehabilitation. This will make our communities safer.

All human life is sacred and, therefore, all social policies and actions in the realm of criminal justice – as with all of our individual and societal actions - must begin with respect for the life and dignity of the human person.

In the context of criminal justice, this means that we must first stand in solidarity with victims. When families are shattered, communities are ripped apart and lives are destroyed. We must seek healing and restoration to the fullest extent possible. Victims and their families need to know that they are not alone and that the resources of the Church and greater community are there to walk with them through their suffering and pain. We must also adequately fund programs to prevent crime. Protecting each of us from harm is among the most basic of government functions. The common good requires a safe, nourishing environment in which all members of society can flourish. It also demands that those who have broken society’s trust are not considered lost but - while paying the price for their actions - are given an opportunity to once more become contributing members of society.

Simultaneously, we must work to eliminate the root causes of crime by recognizing the social value of having good schools and an effective community health system, including mental health. Safe neighborhoods, dynamic educational institutions, and quality, accessible health care provides all of us with security, opportunity, and the chance to prosper together.

Finally, we must also acknowledge the contributions of the women and men who labor daily in the criminal justice system – from district attorneys, police and correctional officers to ministers and volunteers who bring spiritual care to victims and offenders. They are society’s surrogates in a difficult environment and we owe them our thanks and our prayers for their dedicated service.

A debate on criminal justice practices is long-overdue in California and it requires thoughtful attention. Distilling complex realities to “soft” or “tough” on crime slogans ignores the fact that we are dealing with real human lives, with complicated social dynamics and with the need to balance accountability, justice and fairness in our justice system. Prisons do not make good schools or good mental health programs. Proposition 47 can help us do better than that.

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<sup>i</sup> *Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice* – Statement of the Catholic Bishops of the United States, 2000

<sup>ii</sup> Text of *The Safe Neighborhood and Schools Act* – (The Ballot title is: CRIMINAL SENTENCES. MISDEMEANOR PENALTIES. INITIATIVE STATUTE - [http://www.safetyandschools.com/media/uploads/safe\\_neighborhoods\\_and\\_schools\\_act.pdf](http://www.safetyandschools.com/media/uploads/safe_neighborhoods_and_schools_act.pdf)