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To meet the moment, immigration legislation must end criminalization - not perpetuate it

Biden bill needs to do more to include community members who have suffered in U.S.'s racist criminal legal system

2021.2.17 -- In response to the introduction of the U.S. Citizenship Act today in the House and Senate, the Immigrant Justice Network issued the following statement.

For decades, communities across the country have been organizing to win immigration policies that reflect our values of compassion, equality, and respect for people's rights. As momentum grows for transforming the U.S.'s immigration system, we must advance policies that truly turn the page on Trump's abuses.

The power of community organizing has led to several advances in today's bill. The bill adopts a changed definition of conviction, eliminates several bars to relief, and provides more avenues for people with criminal legal system contacts to seek discretionary relief.

Yet in several crucial respects, the bill introduced today falls short of undoing decades of harm against immigrants. The bill would exclude from citizenship and leave vulnerable to deportation many people who have endured a broad range of convictions in a criminal legal system which the public increasingly recognizes is filled with racial bias. Disappointingly, the bill adds new criminal bars to the legalization program on top of the many already-existing bars within current immigration law.

We believe that once people have completed their time in a system that is already unjust, they should not be punished over and over with exclusion, detention, or deportation. And when mass incarceration and mass deportation are entangled, evidence shows that Black immigrants in particular are disproportionately targeted.

As the heinous deportations of Black immigrants during Black history month continue to fracture families, we must continue to press for immediate action from the Biden administration and from Congress.

Calls to combat the criminalization of immigrants have received widespread support within the immigrant rights movement. Over 300 organizations have endorsed the New Way Forward Act; nearly 300 organizations signed [a letter](#) opposed to harsh “criminal bars” in legalization legislation, and over [100 organizations](#) called on the Biden administration not to exclude people who have been criminalized from protection. Elected representatives must honor these demands and do more to stop the criminalization of immigrants.

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Immigrant Justice Network (IJN) members include Families for Freedom, Grassroots Leadership, the Immigrant Defense Project, the Immigrant Legal Resource Center, Just Futures Law, the National Immigrant Project of the National Lawyers Guild, Puente Human Rights Movement, Southeast Asia Resource Action Center, and the Washington Immigrant Solidarity Network.