

Drive to amend 3 strikes law

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unoccupied dwelling, one of many he committed to support a serious drug habit. If paroled, Derik will likely be released when most his age will be planning their retirement. His mother will probably be dead.

"I'm crying because 25 years is really cruel for someone who hasn't done any violent things," said Lawson, who spends the majority of her time volunteering at Families to Amend California's Three Strikes (FACTS), an advocacy group and support network for families that seeks to place an initiative on the November ballot changing the law so it applies to only violent crimes, such as rape, murder, child molestation and armed robbery.

"I'm worried that I may never see him get out."
Darker skin equals higher rate of strikeouts?

Freedie Lawson is not alone.

A new report by the Justice Policy Institute has just been made public; it is titled, "Still Striking Out: Ten years of California's Three Strikes" The study reveals that African-American incarceration rate for third strikers is 12 times higher than for whites (143 per 100,000 to 12 per 100,000.)

The Latino rate of incarceration is 17 per 100,000, which is 45 percent higher than the third strike inmates for whites.

The report also noted that 57 percent of third strikers are accused of non-violent crime.

While analysts focus their attention on the financial costs of Three Strikes in California, which is said to be more than \$4 billion for non-violent offenders, according to the National Institute of Justice, there are very few reports on the emotional and financial costs borne by the families of those incarcerated.

Granted, most inmates deserve to be in prison, said Lawson, and the families of the victims certainly suffer from the same pain and sense of loss that she experiences. However, Lawson and many like her feel that her son also is a victim. Yes, he deserves to pay his debt to society for his crimes — burglarizing someone's home is a very serious offense and an intense violation of privacy and security — but 25-years-to-life is just too outrageous, she said.

"I put a lot of the blame on myself because I knew he had a drug problem, but I just couldn't afford to keep him in a rehab program," said Lawson. She remembers her son being an average kid who was involved in sports and loved bodybuilding. He was a normal African-American child who went to school, hung out with friends and attended church with the family.

"We were just a middle class family trying to do our best. Now he's caught up in the system. It's been very hard on me and the rest of the family," said Lawson.

Her pain and feelings of guilt and hopelessness are shared by literally thousands of families whose lives have been transformed because they too have a loved one incarcerated under the law, the majority for non-violent offenses such as shoplifting \$2.69 worth of AA batteries, forging checks, possession of less than two grams of marijuana or filling out a false driver's license application. The long sentences can destroy families, cause depression and anger. But they also can spur a sense of togetherness as families unite in support of their loved ones.

Sue Reams knows what Three Strikes can do to a family. She has seen her suburban life rocked by the tough-on-crime stance taken

by most. Her son Shane, 35, is serving 25-years-to-life for being the lookout in a \$20 crack cocaine sale. The dealer received only four years, Reams said.

"I felt like someone had knocked the wind out of me," she added. "The attorney kept telling me that he wasn't going to see a day in prison but she didn't know anything about Three Strikes. So when the judge came back with the life sentence, I couldn't even believe it."

Family support helps during trying times

Luckily for Reams and Shane, they have a very strong family. Like Lawson, relatives comes together to support Reams with her efforts to reform the law. She is the Orange County representative for FACTS.

"My husband and two daughters are my support network," she said. "Without them, I don't know what I would do."

Reams, like many other mothers and fathers, blames herself for Shane's sentence. After all, she voted for the law, as did Lawson.

"I thought it was going to

apply to violent offenders only, at least that's what I was told," she said. Reams also blames herself for Shane's first strikes because she is the one who forced neighbors to file charges against her son after he burglarized their houses to get money for drugs. The burglaries counted for his first two strikes and he served 18 months in prison, one of many short stints he served because of his addiction.

"I was a tough love parent and I thought sending him to jail would scare him straight. All it did was get him his first two strikes," she said. Reams said Shane tried to seek help many times and was sober at times, but she could never afford to help him pay for an extensive rehab program and he was unable to enroll in one while serving time. "They just send them in their without any way to better themselves."

What is especially difficult for Reams is that her son has a child of his own, a 13-year-old boy who is afraid to even visit him because of the intimidating and sometimes frightening prison environment.

Shane's younger sisters also have grown and have families of their own, time Shane has missed while in Corcoran Prison where he has been exposed to more violence and drugs instead of rehabilitation, said Reams.

"He says it's difficult to see us come and go. It's hard for him to see everyone growing up without him, especially his son. That relationship has definitely suffered because he's in prison," Reams added. "They all write to him, but the burden of keeping all those relationships up sometimes kind of falls on me and other family members often don't want to talk about it because they know it is painful."

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