



## House Task Force Takes Aim at Over-Criminalization

By John Waage May 07, 2013

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Congress will begin work this week to slash the federal criminal code, charging that it's become so large that every American over age 18 has broken some law without even knowing it.

CBN News has reported on numerous shocking cases of ordinary Americans being charged with crimes in our "Nation of Criminals" series.

Now the House Judiciary Committee is creating a panel called the "Over-Criminalization Task Force of 2013," to fight the problem.

Rep. James Sensenbrenner, R-Wis., head of the panel, has long been a critic of the huge volume of criminal statutes and tens of thousands of regulations that mandate both fines and in some cases, prison time for Americans who often don't know they're breaking a law.

"Over-criminalization is a threat to personal liberty and an expensive and inefficient way to deal with a lot of problems," he said.

Rep. Bobby Scott of Virginia will be the ranking Democrat on the task force.

"In the past 20 or 30 years, the number of people in jails and prisons in America has gone up almost ten-fold because every time you turn around, there are new laws," Scott said.

In 2003, federal agents raided and ransacked the home of Texas retiree George Norris and his wife Kathy. George spent a year and a half in federal prison, charged with selling what the government thought were endangered orchids.

He ended up being convicted on a paperwork violation. But he suffered declining health and had to spend their savings fighting the charges.

"The country that I grew up in was not like this," his wife said, fighting back tears. "I've lost that country, and I don't know how to help get it back."

Heritage Foundation policy analyst Paul Larkin, a former Department of Justice attorney and a criminal enforcement agent at the Environmental Protection Agency said, "Only when the public gets outraged about this will something happen."

"Only then will you see prosecutors not prosecute these cases," he added. "Only then will you see Congress not passing any more laws."

With the partisan divide in Washington deeper than ever, this bi-partisan task force may actually get somewhere.

Groups as diverse as the conservative Heritage Foundation, the liberal American Civil Liberties Union and the libertarian Cato Institute all support reform of the federal criminal code.

Meanwhile, the task force will no doubt hear many more stories of victims of a government wielding too much prosecuting power against its citizens.