



Religion Unplugged

Christian Support for Prison, Police & Policy Reform Under Pressure Amid Crime Surge

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LOS ANGELES — The billionaire scion of the Public Storage company fortune, B. Wayne Hughes Jr., cited his Christian faith when backing prison reform initiatives in California in the past 10 years. Now, at least one of those initiatives is under fire, and Hughes has gone quiet on the topic.

Hughes was one of the biggest proponents of a voter referendum called [Proposition 47](#), which passed in 2014 and reduced penalties for most minor drug and property crimes. At the time, Hughes joined a prison reform coalition that included celebrities such as Jay Z and John Legend, politicians from the right such as Newt Gingrich and Rand Paul, and institutions and figures from the left such as the American Civil Liberties and George Soros. While Hughes talked about how the proposal could save the state money, he often connected his Christian faith to the issue, arguing for prison reform as an ethical and moral issue. “Christ calls us to serve the least of these,” he said in one video.

“Hughes is that rare businessman who manages to embrace Hollywood, Wall Street and the church pew: He invests in real estate, surfs in Malibu, plays cowboy on his ranch and prays in the prison ministries he supports,” reported HuffPost in 2014.

Meanwhile, Proposition 47 has come under criticism nationwide as smash-and-grab theft and shoplifting have spiraled upward. Some critics suggest that policies soft on crime have gone too far in recent years and perhaps even damaged efforts to help the homeless, drug addicts and prostitutes. The tensions around rising murder rates in major cities around the United States in recent years are also creating hurdles for the loose coalition of conservative, Christian and libertarian nonprofits and billionaires who have collaborated with progressive activists in the cause of prison reform and deincarceration.

A coalition for justice reform

A host of nonprofits have promoted reforms for prisons, policing and criminal justice policies in America for decades. They include the Center for Prison Reform, the Sentencing Project, the NAACP’s Criminal Justice Program, the Innocence Project and the Prison Policy Initiative. And these groups have found allies from the libertarian Charles Koch Foundation in recent years, as well as Prison Fellowship, a faith-based nonprofit founded by the late Charles Colson. These groups operate from a belief that too many Americans are locked up — roughly 2 million people — and the rush to incarcerate

masses of people creates a drag on the economic, human and spiritual potential of society. The broad alliance is now threatened by fears of rising crime.

“I do think the recent rise in certain categories of violent crime (which some — it appears mistakenly — perceive as an overall rise in crime rates) and increasingly acute manifestations of social dysfunction in places like San Francisco have dampened some people's enthusiasm for criminal justice reform,” said Clark Neily, senior vice president of legal studies at the libertarian think tank Cato Institute in Washington, D.C.

- Homicide rates spiked to 6.5 per 100,000 people in 2020 — 21,570 murders in total, which was nearly 5,000 more than 2019 — according to FBI data, the highest rate in 22 years but down from the 1990s. The FBI, which counts crimes reported to 80% of police departments, estimates the homicide rate in 2021 rose to 6.9%. As criminologists continue crunching new data from recent years, some are suggesting property crimes and overall crimes are flat or down while violent crimes are up.
- Pew Research combines the FBI data with the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, which surveys Americans about their experience with crime, and notes that both violent crime and property crime rates plunged from the 1990s up until 2019. “Americans tend to believe crime is up, even when the data shows it is down,” wrote Pew researchers.
- Metro areas such as New York City, Chicago and Houston have seen dramatic spikes in some months in some violent crime categories. SafeHome.org reports murder is up 26%, rape up 38% and aggravated assault up 29% nationwide between 2010 and 2020.
- The Public Policy Institute of California notes higher rates of homicides and aggravated assaults in California between 2020 and 2022 now appear to be waning. The organization also notes that auto thefts show a more dramatic spike than shoplifting and smash-and-grab crimes.

“Crime rates are very complex,” said Heather Rice-Minus, Senior Vice President of Advocacy & Church Mobilization for Prison Fellowship. “Our reactions to them as Americans is often very emotional.” Rice-Minus notes that although murder rates have risen recently, the national crime rate had been declining for decades.

Prison Fellowship commissioned a study by Barna Group in October 2019 to understand Christian perceptions of incarceration and criminal justice reform. They discovered that 69% of practicing Christians and 81% of evangelicals thought the crime rate was increasing in the U.S., compared to 60% of all U.S. adults who thought crime was increasing.

Meanwhile, the study indicated that 38% of practicing evangelicals have a stronger sense that their values compel them to support criminal justice reform, compared to 24% of all U.S. adults. The majority of practicing evangelicals, 63%, also said the criminal justice system should provide opportunities for people who commit crimes to make amends to their victims and the community, while only 33% of U.S. adults agreed with that notion.

Most evangelicals, 52% compared to 35% of all U.S. adults, agreed that restoration of all parties — victims, community, perpetrator — should be a goal of the criminal justice system.

Rice-Minus said sounds bites that gain traction on the left and in the U.S. mainstream media often “don’t reflect Americans’ perceptions overall of what needs to happen.” And she recognizes that politics sometimes distracts from long-term reform efforts.

Rice-Minus said she’s seen much progress in justice reform in her decade of work at the Washington-based nonprofit. She said former President Donald Trump and Republicans deserve some credit for passing the bipartisan First Step Act in 2018 that aimed to reduce federal prison incarceration and improve criminal justice outcomes. The Trump administration also passed reform in 2020 that made prisoners eligible for Pell Grants to fund their higher education while in prison, reversing a ban put in place in 1994 by the crime bill passed under President Bill Clinton and Vice President Joe Biden.

A rash of thefts

In California, Proposition 47 brought three broad changes to felony sentencing laws. It reclassified certain theft and drug possession offenses from felonies to misdemeanors, including thefts of items worth \$950 or less. It allowed people currently serving sentences for felonies to petition courts for a resentencing. And it allowed former prisoners to have their felony convictions reclassified as misdemeanors.

The California superior courts said they received more than 200,000 petitions for resentencing or applications for reclassification during the first 13 months after voters approved Proposition 47.

The *New York Times* reported that Walgreens closed 17 stores by May 23, 2021, because of rampant stealing, with retail executives pointing to Proposition 47 as the culprit. And it reported drugstore chain CVS telling employees not to intervene because thieves often attack employees, including security officers. The New York Times quoted CVS Health’s director of retail crime, Brendan Dugan, calling San Francisco “one of the epicenters of organized retail crime.”

“The one trend we are seeing is more violence and escalating,” Commander Raj Vaswani, head of the investigation’s bureau at the San Francisco Police Department, told the *Times*. “We see a lot of repeat offenders.” The *Times* reported that some of the thieves sell the stolen merchandise on the streets not far from the drugstores. The paper quoted some local residents upset that Walgreens was closing a branch drugstore after 18 theft incidents, demanding the location stay open and arguing that Walgreens Corp., with annual revenue of \$139.5 billion, should be able to absorb theft.

ABC7 in San Francisco said the California Retailer’s Association points to three cities — Los Angeles, San Francisco and Sacramento — as top 10 cities nationally for organized retail crime. It reported that Target is closing some stores in San Francisco because of the

retail crime, one of the only cities in America where the Minnesota-based retail giant is closing stores.

By July 2021, California Governor Gavin Newsom signed a law aimed at curbing rampant, organized retail theft. The law reestablished organized retail theft as a crime and allowed prosecutors to charge the crime as a misdemeanor or a felony. Some hoped that law change would curb the estimated \$16.3 billion in retail theft between 2018 and 2021 in the state. Yet some believed Proposition 47 remained a problem.

“The easiest way to reduce crime is to fix Proposition 47 and reimpose strong sentencing for the pervasive retail theft that is literally closing stores across our state,” said Tracy McCray, vice president of the San Francisco Police Officers Association, in an Associated Press article. “Exacerbating the situation is San Francisco District Attorney Chesa Boudin’s insistence on dropping or downgrading charges of those caught red-handed that allows those very same crooks to further victimize our communities over and over again.”

The Wall Street Journal reported in September that retailers such as CVS Health Corp. are spending millions per year to stop gangs of thieves from robbing their stores of products to sell online via platforms such as Amazon.com. CVS reports thefts are up 30% since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Coalition of Law Enforcement and Retail, a trade association, estimates organized retail theft totals \$45 billion annually, up from \$30 billion a decade ago. Brands such as Home Depot, Target and TJ Maxx are all spending more to counter rings of thieves.

In December, the progressive mayor of San Francisco, London Breed, decided the violence, theft, drug dealing, property crime and street encampments in the Tenderloin district of San Francisco had gone too far. Police had seized 600 grams of the lethal opioid fentanyl in the previous week. Gangs of robbers were operating smash-and-grab looting runs at luxury brand stores such as Yves St. Laurent and Louis Vuitton in the nearby Union Square neighborhood, creating viral video clips seen nationwide and making a mockery of the City by the Bay.

“It’s time the reign of criminals who are destroying our city come to an end,” Mayor Breed said at a press conference. “And it comes to an end when we take the steps to more aggressive with law enforcement: more aggressive with the changes in our policies and less tolerant of all the bulls--- that has destroyed our city.”

San Francisco’s voters ousted progressive left District Attorney Chesa Boudin in June as police statistics showed larcenies up 20% and overall crime up 8%. Boudin is the son of left-wing radicals David Gilbert and Katherine Boudin, who were part of the violent Weather Underground group and served as getaway drivers in the Rockland County, New York, botched heist of a Brinks armored car in 1981 that left two police officers and the Brinks truck driver dead. Boudin was elected as district attorney in 2019 on a Black Lives Matter-aligned platform aimed at reforming the criminal justice system. “The outcome and its lopsided margin was a rebuke of the left as Democrats retreat from calls to “defund the

police” in the face of polls nationally showing growing concern about public safety, especially from people of color,” reported NBC News.

The crime and filth in San Francisco have become the butt of jokes. Hall of Fame NBA player and TNT “Inside the NBA” analyst Charles Barkley enjoyed needling the city on live television during the rain delay of a May playoff game between the Dallas Mavericks and the San Francisco-based Golden State Warriors. “The only bad thing about all this rain? It's not raining in San Francisco to clean up those dirty ass streets they got there,” Barkley said. “San Francisco, it’s a great city. But all that dirtiness and homelessness, you all got to clean that off the streets.”

Proposition 47’s unintended consequences

“A lot of times with these laws, people think they are doing something to benefit someone, but it really doesn’t,” said Jim Palmer, president and CEO of the Orange County Rescue Mission, which has 12 locations and serves hundreds of homeless people in Southern California.

Palmer told *ReligionUnplugged.com* that California measures such as Proposition 47 have led to unintended consequences and “created this very strange world, high levels of theft.” Palmer also said his organization works with women between ages 18 and 30 who are trafficked as prostitutes. He said California laws don’t consider these women as victims, and as a result, they are not arrested. He said arresting prostitutes helps women gain clarity, get away from a pimp, obtain counseling and decide if they want out of that situation.

The decriminalization and deincarceration efforts in California happened over a period of years. In 2009, a California court ruled a prisoner’s 8th Amendment rights were violated, creating a mandate to reduce inmate populations in the state’s prisons. Two years later, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the 2009 court ruling. And that same year, 2011, California legislation AB-109 shifted state prison populations to county prisons as an effort to reduce incarceration in the state.

Former Governor Jerry Brown, D-Calif. — and a host of organizations and figures such as the ACLU, California Democrats and Mark Zuckerberg — defended the proposals that had decriminalized offenses and reduced mass incarceration. “Don’t fall for this latest scare tactic on criminal justice reform,” said Brown in a 2018 story in *The Sacramento Bee*.

"Should California abandon its historic criminal justice reforms and return to the bad old days of overcrowded prisons full of Black and brown people?" asked the editorial page of the *Bee*. “Since those criminal justice reforms are working, we think the answer is a resounding ‘no.’ “

A prison reform champion

For two decades, Hughes worked for his father, billionaire B. Wayne Hughes Sr., who founded Public Storage, the largest publicly traded self-storage company in the country. Hughes Sr. died last August at age 87. Forbes estimated his personal wealth at \$3.2 billion, his daughter's fortune at \$5.7 billion and his son's wealth at \$1.7 billion.

Hughes Jr., 55, had been a major donor to the California Republican Party, supporting gubernatorial candidates Arnold Schwarzenegger and Meg Whitman. But he morphed into an aisle-crossing libertarian as the criminal justice issue became his passion. He told media outlets that he first got involved with criminal justice issues around 2000, when he became a Christian believer, and his interest intensified in 2010, when he met the late Chuck Colson at a fundraiser at the Ronald Reagan library. Colson had spent time in prison for his role as a "hatchet man" in Richard Nixon's white house during the Watergate scandal. Colson famously became a born-again Christian while in prison and later founded the prison ministry called Prison Fellowship.

"As a Christian and a conservative, I used to believe that anyone convicted of a crime deserved whatever punishment they received — the longer the better," Hughes Jr. wrote in an op-ed in 2016. "This 'un-biblical' view, fortunately, was radically altered." Colson invited Hughes on a tour of the notorious Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola, which houses over 6,000 convicts. An innovative warden impressed him for his dedication to transforming inmates. "If you have a heart for ministry, prison is where people are being compressed — either into diamonds or dust."

Hughes told Forbes and other outlets that he got involved with Proposition 47 when a "friend on the left" approached him because of his prison work. He agreed to give an initial \$250,000 to sponsor a signature drive for the ballot measure. Other donors included Soros' Open Society Policy Center, Netflix founder Reed Hastings, Nicholas Pritzker, Molly Munger — daughter of investor Charles Munger — and former Wall Street Journal reporter Cari Tuna, now a philanthropist who married Facebook billionaire Dustin Moskovitz.

Hughes wrote op-eds with Sen. Rand Paul and former Rep. Newt Gingrich to support Proposition 47. He also gave nearly \$1.3 million to help get it passed and sponsored an organization called Serving California, which aimed to help inmates, crime victims and veterans. *ReligionUnplugged.com* reached out by email to Gingrich on LinkedIn to request an interview on the topic of Proposition 47 and the prison reform movement. *ReligionUnplugged.com* also left messages with the office of Paul, requesting an interview on the topic. Neither responded.

Linking prison reform with Christian ministry

Hughes delivered a 7-minute TED Talk in 2014 while campaigning for Proposition 47. He described visiting a prison and praying to himself, "Lord, give me the words to say," he said, explaining how he spoke to the prisoners with his Bible and notes in hand before wind blew the notes away.

“When folks are in this kind of position (prison), God walks with them,” he said. “And I’m compelled to be there too. Being in such a hard place, folks are in need of a helping hand. The programs we put together meet those needs.”

He talked about The Urban Ministry Institute, a nondenominational seminary that aims to train people for ministry, including in prisons. He said his own Serving California nonprofit funds TUMI programs in the state of California. He noted his programs were operating in dozens of prisons with hundreds of prisoners. He said the TUMI program in California is as large as the program in the 49 other states in the country combined, times two. “There is no other explanation for that other than the Lord.”

“You’ve heard that you can’t put God in a box — and it’s true you can’t put God in a box,” Hughes Jr. said during his TED Talk. “But you can invite him into your cell. You can invite him into a cell block. You can invite him into the yard. You can invite him into the prison. You have heard God only helps those who help themselves. That is not true. He is with the brokenhearted. He is with the downtrodden. He is with the orphan. He is with the widow. He is most definitely with the prisoner. You’ve heard it said if God exists, why is there so much evil and injustice in the world. Why doesn’t he do something? Well, he did do something. He made you. He made me. He made us.”

Proposition 47 passed Nov. 6, 2014, with 59.6% of voters in California voting in its favor. In a press release championing the victorious legislation, Hughes noted that America’s 2.3 million incarcerated adults dwarfed the 1.7 million incarcerated adults in China, which has a 1.4 billion population — quadruple the size of the U.S. “I have always felt that over-incarceration was a fiscal and an ethical issue,” Hughes said in a press release. “With Proposition 47 passed, thousands of nonviolent prisoners will be eligible for release and be able to move on with their lives.”

Hughes appears to have given to many other Christian and conservative causes. According to a 2013 miniprofile in the *L.A. Business Journal*, Hughes donated \$100,000 to a failed ballot measure to restrict political fundraising by unions. He’s been a board member of the conservative Prager University in Herndon, Virginia, which purports to teach “freedom, personal responsibility and capitalism.” He helped found Oaks Christian Middle School in Westlake Village-Thousand Oaks. He helped start the Urban Ministry Institute in 2011 and started the Cantinas Foundation to promote arts and education in a Christian context. It said he also wanted to open a Christian youth camp on land next to his ranch in San Luis Obispo County.

Defending Proposition 47 against criticism

By September of 2015, Hughes Jr. was defending Proposition 47 against criticism that it was contributing to a rise in crime. “Prop. 47, like other measures that upend the status quo and wrest power away from institutional stakeholders and bring us back into the realm of consideration and grace, was intensely opposed by some in the law enforcement community,” he wrote in an op-ed in *The Orange County Register*. “The sky will fall,

murder and mayhem will ensue, lawlessness will prevail. And so the narrative has gone and goes today.”

Some naysayers started to question the intended and unintended consequences of the new policy. Some worried a new soft-on-crime era would damage public safety as well as the health and safety of the homeless and criminals who received less intervention.

“Over-incarceration makes no fiscal sense. California spends \$62,396 per prisoner each year, and \$10 billion overall on corrections. That is larger than the entire budget of 12 other states,” Hughes wrote in an op-ed in the *Riverside Press-Enterprise* in 2015 after Proposition 47 passed. “Meanwhile, California spends only \$9,200 per K-12 student, and the average salary for a new teacher is \$41,926. California has built 22 prisons, but only one new university, in 30 years.”

Rice-Minus at Prison Fellowship said people should be careful blaming Proposition 47 for the spike in thefts. While there are “lots of critics of Prop. 47,” she said in an interview with *ReligionUnplugged.com*, there is not a lot of evidence that it causes more retail theft. She said organized retail theft is reported to be up dramatically, while overall property crime has decreased slightly in recent years. She said weak law enforcement and prosecution are the culprits: “It’s not that the laws on the books are wrong.”

She thinks Proposition 47 included some important reforms, such as adjusting the felony threshold for property crimes to keep pace with inflation and to make punishment commensurate with theft amounts. “Punishment for a crime has to be proportionate,” she said. “It has to be a just response to an offense committed.”

Rice-Minus, however, agrees that criminals need to be held accountable and made aware how their crime is causing harm. “For people to look into the face of someone they have taken from — or from someone who saw a son and daughter die from a drug overdose — we would see a lot more change in people we are locking up,” she said.

Questions for long-time justice reformists?

ReligionUnplugged.com emailed staff at The Urban Ministry Institute to find out if Hughes Jr. still supports and partners with TUMI but did not receive a response. *RUP* also tried to reach Hughes Jr. with a LinkedIn message but did not receive a response.

ReligionUnplugged.com discovered some contacts to Hughes’ previous organizations in prison reform were discontinued. The website for his nonprofit, Serving California, is unresponsive. *ReligionUnplugged.com* reached out to Serving USA and heard back from its president, Greg Bruce, who is based in Camas, Washington. Bruce encouraged *RUP* to reach out to Prison Fellowship, Serving USA’s primary partner for prison ministry. “Serving USA does not directly conduct programming,” he wrote. “We are a financial partner/supporter of organizations actually implementing the program.”

Prison Fellowship gave Hughes Jr. its “Legacy of Hope” award in 2018.

ReligionUnplugged.com called Prison Fellowship to discuss Hughes and Proposition 47. A spokesman for Prison Fellowship, Jim Forbes, said he hasn't had close contact with Hughes in recent years but acknowledged Hughes' donations and involvement in the past.

Forbes sent *ReligionUnplugged.com* two press releases that show both Prison Fellowship's concern about rising crime and its commitment to reforming criminal justice policies it considers unjust. In a September press release, Prison Fellowship applauded legislation that created more consistent policies on powder cocaine and crack cocaine, noting that harsher punishment for possession of crack cocaine in year's past led to overincarceration of people with low income and people of color — as 81% of defendants convicted of crack cocaine possession in fiscal year 2019 were Black.

Prison Fellowship leaders said in another September press release that it's concerned about rising crime, as evidenced by FBI Crime Statistics for 2020, which showed homicides up by 29% and violent crime up by 6%. The organization's president and chief executive, James Ackerman, said local churches are crucial to help care for victims.

Clark Neily of the Cato Institute said the warring over the pace and scope of crime rates and crime reform will stabilize over time. He said, in an email to *ReligionUnplugged.com*, that many people become more conservative temperamentally, but not politically, during chaotic times such as the COVID-19 pandemic. “So, the change in mindset on criminal justice reform is both unsurprising and, I would predict, likely to be temporary,” he said. “The system's pathologies are just too deep and too pervasive to ignore, and the chances of meaningful reform coming from inside the system itself are approximately zero.”

Competing views on police, prison and policy

Some protestors, activists and politicians on the progressive left launched a drumbeat of slogans, such as “defund the police” and “all cops are bad” in recent years. Some have proposed abolishing traffic stops or funding unarmed mental health workers rather than police as ways to reduce incarcerations, deaths and injuries during police interactions. Many in the Republican Party and Christian right — such as Tim Scott, Herschel Walker and former Vice President Mike Pence — reacted against these anti-police sentiments and ideas, exposing tensions on topics of justice reform and rule of law.

“We recognize that an effective police force plays a very valuable role in maintaining public safety in the community,” said Rice-Minus, noting that Prison Fellowship continues focusing on issues of proportional punishment and constructive corrections culture. “We think that a restorative approach to policing uses proven crime reduction practices and promotes the community participating in the solution. What we've seen, though, is the legitimacy of police authority requires not only proactive prevention of crime but also meaningful provision for accountability where community trust is broken.”

She also said she understands that wars over memes and slogans such as “defund the police” have created a politicized public discourse on law enforcement and prison reform

topics. She realizes many Americans share common values on how to improve policing and prisons. A vast majority of Americans — 89% according to Cato Institute — support police using body cameras to document their interactions with citizens. “There are so many terms that are polarizing that put you in one camp or another. It’s hard to have meaningful conversations about those kinds of reforms even where Americans regardless of party can agree,” Rice-Minus said.

Rice-Minus said the right-of-center coalition on the justice reform issues has held together through the political tumult and rising crime rates in recent years. But, she admits, “there is a push from those on the far left for more than what many on the far right believe is the right policy for public safety.” The policy and ideological differences have led to “more of those hard conversations” while both sides trying to locate what policies they still agree upon.

She said one example of a point of tension is the far left’s idea that criminals should not be charged for some property crimes or for fleeing from an officer during a traffic stop. “That’s a recipe for some of the high crime outcomes we are seeing,” she said. “We would say every crime needs to have some form of accountability. If it doesn’t have swift and certain accountability, you are going to see a rise in crime.”

She said Prison Fellowship also cannot agree with people who are prison abolitionists. “That’s where we are at risk for losing the rule of law,” she said.

Rice-Minus suggests Christians should play the long game when working in the criminal justice sector. She advises Christian leaders in churches and nonprofits to try to understand complexity in crime rates, which are affected by several factors, such as public policy, police norms, the economy, drug markets and population trends. She insists that disproportionate sentences for criminals are not effective and run counter to Christian values.

“Often, we have very emotional reactions to crime,” Rice-Minus said. “They are not always based in fact or best policy decisions. As Christians, if we believe we are created in God’s image with inherent dignity and value, we have a duty to seek justice to correct oppression and to do that in a way that honors the inherent dignity and value of every person. That includes officers in blue uniforms. It includes perpetrators of crimes and victims.”