

# OVERVIEW OF MAJOR ISSUES AND TRENDS

## **External Factors: Conditions in the United States and the World**

*Terrorism and the changing political environment.* Foreign political movements, whether state-sponsored or the work of particular groups or individuals, may use terror to achieve their aims and target U.S. persons or interests at home or abroad.

*Technology.* Advances in high speed telecommunications, computers, and other technologies are creating new opportunities for criminals, new classes of crimes, and new challenges for law enforcement. Growing dependence on technology is creating an increasing vulnerability to insider threats and illegal acts, especially white collar crime, drugs, and terrorism.

*Economy.* The amount of regulation and the pace of economic growth and globalization are changing the volume and nature of anti-competitive behavior. The interconnected nature of the world's economy is increasing opportunities for criminal activity, including money laundering, white collar crime, and alien smuggling, as well as the complexity and scope of civil justice matters.

*Government.* Changes in the fiscal posture or policies of state and local governments could have dramatic effects on their capacity to remain effective law enforcement partners. For example, the ability and willingness of these governments to allow federal use of their jail space affects achievement of detention goals. Furthermore, issues of criminal and civil justice increasingly transcend national boundaries, requiring the cooperation of

foreign governments and involving treaty obligations, multinational environment and trade agreements, and other foreign policy concerns.

*Social-demographic.* The United States is an increasingly multi-cultural and multi-racial society. The extent to which societal attitudes and practices reflect a continuing commitment to tolerance, diversity, and equality affect the scope and nature of DOJ's work. Achieving the Department's goals depends on strong institutions – families, schools, neighborhood groups, and others – that inspire trust, build community, promote civic and individual responsibility, and help secure voluntary compliance with the rule of law.

## **The Attorney General's Priorities and the Years Ahead**

At the direction of the Attorney General, in early 2013 the Justice Department launched a comprehensive review of the criminal justice system in order to identify reforms that would ensure federal laws are enforced more fairly and – in an era of reduced budgets – more efficiently. Specifically, this project identified five goals:

- To ensure finite resources are devoted to the most important law enforcement priorities;
- To promote fairer enforcement of the laws and alleviate disparate impacts of the criminal justice system;
- To ensure just punishments for low-level, nonviolent convictions;

- To bolster prevention and reentry efforts to deter crime and reduce recidivism;
- To strengthen protections for vulnerable populations.

As part of its review, the Department studied all phases of the criminal justice system – including charging, sentencing, incarceration and reentry – to examine which practices are most successful at deterring crime and protecting the public, and which aren't.

The preliminary results of this review suggest a need for a change in our approach to enforcing the nation's laws. Today, a vicious cycle of poverty, criminality, and incarceration traps too many Americans and weakens too many communities. The United States today has the highest rate of incarceration of any nation in the world, and the nationwide cost to state and federal budgets was \$80 billion in 2010 alone. This pattern of incarceration is disruptive to families, and expensive to the taxpayer, and may not serve the goal of reducing recidivism.

The reality is, while the aggressive enforcement of federal criminal statutes remains necessary, we cannot prosecute our way to becoming a safer nation.

Additionally, federal detention and prison spending is on an unsustainable track, increasingly displacing other important public safety investments – including resources for investigation, prosecution, prevention, intervention, prisoner reentry, and assistance to state and local law enforcement. To be effective, federal efforts must also focus on prevention and reentry. In addition, it is time to rethink the nation's system of mass imprisonment. We must marshal resources, and use evidence-based strategies, to curb the disturbing rates of recidivism by those reentering our communities.

By shifting away from our over-reliance on incarceration, we can focus resources on the most important law enforcement priorities, such as violence prevention and protection of vulnerable populations. In the months and years ahead, the Department will continue to push an effort to implement a smarter overall approach to the criminal justice system.

The Department's *Strategic Plan*, outlined in the following pages, is adaptable. It has an emphasis on broad initiatives and strategic goals that support the Attorney General's priorities and can be adapted quickly to address new legal challenges.