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What Missouri's update of its criminal code missed

Mary Ann McGivern | Sep. 21, 2012 NCR Today

The Missouri Bar has revised the state's criminal code, and now the state legislature is holding hearings, considering whether to adopt the changes.

Many of the changes simply put order in the accumulation of laws of the 50 years since its last revision. "He or she" replaces "he." The bright line for felony stealing is $750 now, not the old $500.

Drug possession penalties are reduced considerably. Crack and powder cocaine disparities are reduced; possession of marijuana becomes a misdemeanor, not a felony; sentences are shorter.

But sentences for violent crimes have the potential to be longer and enhancements tougher. If you have two teenage felony convictions for marijuana possession, now no longer a felony, you are eligible for serious jail time for stealing a ham from the grocery store to feed your family.

Missouri already has longer sentences than most states, and evidence shows longer sentences neither deter crime nor reform criminals. Shorter sentences seem to have more impact on the offender, and they are cheaper for the taxpayer.

I'm a member of a criminal justice task force that will testify at the hearings for lowering the sentencing range -- say from one to four years down to one to two years for the lowest-grade felony. Here's a case where we can demonstrate that mercy is an effective public safety strategy.

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