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# JustSouth Monthly

JSRI Perspectives on FAITH DOING JUSTICE

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## For the Common Good Minimum Wages Reduce Crime

by Alí Bustamante, Ph.D.

### JSRI Future Activities

#### January 23

Fr. Fred Kammer will chair the Governance Committee meeting of the Jesuit Volunteer Corps (JVC) Board of Directors.

#### January 25

JSRI staff will meet with Fr. Jean-Denis Saint Félix, secretary for social and international ministries of the Jesuit Conference of Canada and the United States.

#### February 3-6

Dr. Alí Bustamante and Dr. Nik Mitchell will participate in the 2018 Catholic Social Ministry Gathering in Washington, D.C.

#### February 5

Fr. Kammer will participate in the Baltimore meeting of the JVC Board of Directors.

#### February 6

JSRI will co-host an Ignatian Teach-In on mass incarceration.

### JSRI Recent Activities

#### January 5-7

For many decades, the U.S. Catholic bishops have suggested minimum wage increases as a key contribution to human dignity and protecting the rights of workers.[1] Research published earlier this month finds strong empirical evidence that state minimum wage increases not only benefit workers directly but also reduce crime, thereby further serving the common good. The authors estimate that a \$1 increase in state minimum wages is associated with a 4 percent decrease in recidivism as ex-offenders are drawn into the formal labor market and away from property and drug crimes.[2]



*University students learn about re-entry challenges with ex-offenders at a JSRI Ignatian Teach-In on mass incarceration.*

The societal and economic benefits from reduced recidivism are likely to be greater in the Gulf South. Since 1998, Louisiana has had the highest incarceration rate among the 50 states. Similarly, most recently available data show that Alabama, Mississippi, Texas, and Florida ranked third, fourth, seventh, and tenth in highest incarceration rates in the country.[3] Of the five states in the

Mary Baudouin and Fr. Kammer co-lead the social justice re-orientation retreat for 70 mid-America Jesuit Volunteers in Texas hill country.

### December 20

Dr. Mitchell and Dr. Sue Weishar participated in a planning meeting of the Louisiana Youth Justice Coalition in Mid-City.

### December 20

Dr. Weishar and other members of the Greater New Orleans Interfaith Sanctuary Coalition met with immigrant activist, Cristi Rosales, in New Orleans East about recent immigration raids in the local community.

### December 13

Fr. Kammer and Dr. Weishar participated in a planning meeting at JSRI of the Ethical Policing Is Courageous (EPIC) Conference.

### December 10

Dr. Weishar helped organize a Know Your Rights training at St. Anthony of Padua Church, which was provided by Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New Orleans for the immigrant members of the parish.

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Gulf South, only Florida has a state minimum wage above the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour.[4]

In Catholic social thought, the principle of a just wage holds that wages must allow workers to support themselves, their families, and the common good.[5] Ex-offenders are not exempt from these considerations, and their right to human dignity must not be abandoned.

Over 600,000 people are released from U.S. prisons annually. The stigma of criminal convictions coupled with gaps in work histories and typically lower levels of educational attainment leave ex-offenders with scant employment prospects. The difficulty in obtaining good jobs faced by ex-offenders impacts their ability to provide a dignified livelihood for themselves and their families. In the absence of legal employment opportunities and community support, some see crime as the only way to make ends meet.

The common good is undermined by both “criminal behavior that threatens the lives and dignity of others and by policies that seem to give up on those who have broken the law.”[6] Catholic social teaching is unambiguous in declaring that wages that are unjust demean human dignity and human life. Employers have a clear moral duty to provide a just wage, and governments are responsible for policies that serve the common good.[7]

Society’s resources should move away from more and more imprisonment and toward crime prevention and rehabilitation. There is no shortage of proven strategies that both reduce crime and the number of prison inmates: minimum wage increases, addiction and mental health treatment, restorative justice programs, etc.

We must insist upon a vision of a common good that gives primacy to human dignity for all people and in all places. The impact that state minimum wage increases have on reducing crime is further evidence that even policies targeted to those with the least among us tend to benefit us all.

[1] St. John XXIII. (1961). *Mater et Magistra (Mother and Teacher)*, 20.

[2] Agan, A.Y., & Makowsky M. D. (2018). *The Minimum Wage, EITC, and Criminal Recidivism*. Retrieved from SSRN: [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3097203](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3097203)

[3] Author analysis of data from U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics. (2018). *National Prisoner Statistics Program*. Retrieved January 8, 2018, from <https://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=nps>

[4] U.S. Department of Labor. (2018, January 8). *Minimum Wage Laws in the States*. Retrieved from <https://www.dol.gov/whd/minwage/america.htm>

[5] Catholic Church. (1994). *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2434.

[6] U.S. Catholic Bishops. (2000). *Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice*.

[7] *Mater et Magistra (Mother and Teacher)*, 20.

Monthly articles reflect the opinions of the authors and not necessarily those of Loyola University New Orleans. Please send feedback to [jsri@loyno.edu](mailto:jsri@loyno.edu)

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