

Obama's clemency grant largest since the 1960s

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President Obama granted clemency Monday to 46 men and women who have spent years and faced decades in prison for non-violent, drug offenses. USA TODAY



(Photo: Jim Lo Scalzo, European Pressphoto Agency)

WASHINGTON — President Obama granted clemency Monday to 46 men and women who faced decades in prison for non-violent, drug offenses, part of an overall effort to address sentencing disparities nationwide.

"Their punishments didn't fit the crime, and if they had been sentenced under today's laws, nearly all of them would have already served their time," Obama said in an announcement video posted on [the White House website \(https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2015/07/13/president-obama-announces-46-commutations-video-address-america-nation-second-chance\)](https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2015/07/13/president-obama-announces-46-commutations-video-address-america-nation-second-chance).

The 46 commutations — the most granted by a president in a single day since at least the Lyndon Johnson administration of the 1960s — all involved drug crimes, mostly cocaine trafficking.

The prisoners will all be released by Nov. 10.

In the video message, Obama said the people whose sentences he commuted were not "hardened criminals," but "the overwhelming majority had been sentenced to at least 20 years," while 14 of them received life sentences for non-violent drug offenses.



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[Who are the 46 people whose sentences were commuted by the president?](http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2015/07/13/prisoners-with-commuted-sentences/30094231/)

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"I believe that at its heart America is a nation of second chances," Obama said. "And I believe these folks deserve their second chance."

The president also called on Republicans and Democrats in Congress to change anomalies in federal sentencing laws, kicking off a week of presidential events devoted to the criminal justice system.

The schedule includes a speech Tuesday to the NAACP national convention and a first-ever presidential visit to a federal prison Thursday in Oklahoma.

Noting that Republicans have also expressed interest in criminal justice reform, Obama said the nation is spending too much money on incarceration of individuals who received long sentences for relatively minor drug crimes.

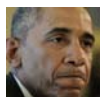
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[Koch urges Obama administration to speed up clemency program](#)



[\(http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2016/2015/06/01/charles-koch-president-obama-release-drug-offenders-clemency/28309233/\)](http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2016/2015/06/01/charles-koch-president-obama-release-drug-offenders-clemency/28309233/)

The latest batch of commutations brings Obama's overall number of commutations to 89 people during his presidency. He has granted full pardons to another 64 people.



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[Obama to release 22 drug offenders in clemency push](#)

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Obama sent letters to the prisoners whose sentences he commuted Monday.

"I am granting your application because you have demonstrated the potential to turn your life around," Obama wrote to Jerry Allen Bailey in care of the federal prison in Jesup, Ga. "Now it is up to you to make the most of this opportunity."



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[Obama administration clemency push gets slow start](#)

[\(http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2015/05/31/obama-clemency-initiative/27963853/\)](http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2015/05/31/obama-clemency-initiative/27963853/)



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['The clock is running' on Obama clemency initiative](#)

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Deputy Attorney General Sally Quillian Yates said the president asked the Justice Department last year to develop criteria to justify commutations for "non-violent, low-level offenders who received harsh sentences" that they would not receive today because of changed punishment guidelines.

"We will continue to recommend to the President appropriate candidates for clemency," Yates said. "And we will continue to work with Congress on re-calibrating our sentencing laws for non-violent drug offenders."

One House Republican -- Rep. Jim Sensenbrenner of Wisconsin -- chided Obama for engaging in "publicity stunts" rather than working directly with Congress. "Commuting the sentences of a few drug offenders is a move designed to spur headlines, not meaningful reform," he said.

White House Counsel Neil Eggleston said he expects Obama to issue more commutations and pardons in the months ahead, but those will not be enough to "fix decades of overly punitive sentencing policies" — the topic of his NAACP speech Tuesday.

Obama and other lawmakers have said that "tough-on-crime" legislators of the past approved harsh new penalties, many of which fell disproportionately on African-Americans and Hispanics.

Calls for new rules have made been across the political spectrum, from the White House to the Koch brothers, the conservative donors who have given millions to Republican presidential campaigns.

White House spokesman Josh Earnest said Obama will use "executive authority to try to correct as many injustices as possible," but also wants to work with Congress to "enact the kind of reforms that the president can't by acting on his own."

The president is expected to meet with inmates themselves during his trip Thursday to the El Reno Federal Correctional Institution outside of Oklahoma City.

P.S. Ruckman, Jr., a Rock Valley College professor who tracks clemency trends on the blog Pardon Power, described Obama's action Monday as "one of the most intelligent, systematic uses" of that power in decades.

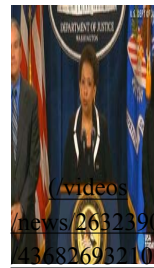
Ruckman just wishes Obama had started earlier, because "late-term pardons tend to attract a lot of criticism — some well deserved — and they tend to cast the pardon power in a bad light, and unfairly taint the recognition that well deserving recipients have earned."

Organizations that have long urged Obama to exercise his commutation and pardon powers said Monday's actions are more steps along the way.

"Many non-violent prisoners are still serving unduly harsh prison terms based on repudiated laws and policies," said Cynthia Roseberry, director of Clemency Project 2014. "That means we have quite a bit of work ahead."

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