Over 70 Current and Former Elected Prosecutors Urge CA’s Highest Court to Review Concerning Interpretation of Three Strikes Law That Erodes Prosecutorial Discretion

Elected DAs & AGs nationwide support Los Angeles DA George Gascón’s autonomy to implement charging and sentencing policies that voters elected him to carry out

SAN FRANCISCO – Today, a bipartisan group of 73 current and former elected prosecutors and attorneys general from around the country urged the California Supreme Court to protect the discretion of Los Angeles County District Attorney George Gascón and other elected prosecutors in the state to decide if and when three strikes sentencing enhancements are the best use of limited resources in promoting justice and public safety. The signatories to the amicus letter brief – including two former Los Angeles County DAs – advocated for further review of a prior Court of Appeal’s ruling requiring that prosecutors charge and prove all enhancements under the state’s three strikes law. The brief argues that this unprecedented intrusion on constitutionally protected discretion creates a deeply concerning and dangerous starting point that erodes the will of voters who elected DA Gascón based on his commitment to roll back tough-on-crime policies.

The letter brief stems from a lawsuit from the Los Angeles County Association of Deputy District Attorneys (ADDA), which seeks to stop DA Gascón from carrying out policies he campaigned on and enacted upon assumption of office, including ending three strikes sentencing enhancements that have fueled mass incarceration and racial disparities without improving community safety. The signatories argue that the ADDA is seeking to use the courts to unlawfully infringe on decisions uniquely entrusted to the DA and that the problematic lower court decisions “are substituting their own judgment for DA Gascón’s, taking an active role in the functioning of his office.” The letter brief urges the Supreme Court to review the case and not allow this “judicial interference” to stand.

“Chief prosecutors are chosen by the voters to reflect the community’s vision for public safety, and the people of Los Angeles chose reform when they elected George Gascón to be their district attorney. California’s highest court has the ability to reaffirm the settled autonomy and discretion of a duly elected prosecutor, while also addressing the ongoing injustices of our state’s three strikes law. As such, this case presents a perfect opportunity to protect the rule of law, preserve prosecutorial independence that is essential to a functioning judicial system, and ensure our courts do not erode the prerogative of elected prosecutors to reject failed practices of the past,” said Miriam Krinsky,
Executive Director of Fair and Just Prosecution, co-counsel on the brief and a former federal prosecutor in Los Angeles, as well as the former President of LA City’s Ethics Commission.

The signatories to the letter brief emphasize the unique nature of the Court of Appeal’s ruling: “[W]e could not find another case in California where courts have overridden a prosecutor’s decision not to file charges or sentence enhancements and held that the opposite is true—that in every case, prosecutors are compelled to file and prove them.” This type of intrusion has “shattered long-standing separation of powers doctrine” and eroded the autonomy of the district attorney.

“The independence of the prosecutor has been well established since our country’s founding, and it is essential for the fair execution of justice that the elected district attorney – not the courts or line prosecutors – has the power to set officewide charging and sentencing policies. Denying a prosecutor their constitutionally protected discretion would be a serious violation of separation of powers and a subversion of the will of the community,” said former Los Angeles County District Attorney and Los Angeles City Attorney Ira Reiner, a signatory to the letter brief.

The signatories highlight that the Court of Appeal’s ruling not only undermines prosecutorial discretion but also makes communities less safe by mandating the use of three strikes enhancements, noting that “there is no research that shows sentencing enhancements improve public safety, but there is evidence that excessive sentences increase recidivism and therefore create more victims in the future.” Under DA Gascón’s directives ending the use of three strikes enhancements, people who cause harm are still held accountable without wasting limited resources by adding extra and unnecessary years to sentences.

"For decades, courts have respected prosecutorial discretion when it was used to lock more people up for longer sentences without making us safer. Now, when DA Gascón is seeking to implement data-driven strategies that promote both justice and safety, the court must continue to respect the separation of powers and do the same,” said Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison, a signatory to the letter brief.

“More and more communities nationwide are coming to realize that the era of mass incarceration has not made us safer, and DA Gascón was put in office based on his commitment to bring fundamental change to the criminal legal system. Preventing him from carrying out that vision – and mandating that he do the opposite – will foster distrust in the legal system and therefore undermine public safety,” said Michael Romano, co-counsel on the brief and Director of the Three Strikes and Justice Advocacy Projects at Stanford Law School.

Read the letter brief here; for a list of amici, see below.

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Fair and Just Prosecution is a national network of elected prosecutors working towards common-sense, compassionate criminal justice reforms. To learn more about FJP’s work, visit our website and follow us on Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn.
List of Amici

Diana Becton
District Attorney, Contra Costa County, California

Wesley Bell
Prosecuting Attorney, St. Louis County, Missouri

Buta Biberaj
Commonwealth’s Attorney, Loudoun County, Virginia

Sherry Boston
District Attorney, DeKalb County, Georgia

Chesa Boudin
Former District Attorney, City and County of San Francisco, California

Alvin Bragg
District Attorney, New York County (Manhattan), New York

Aisha Braveboy
State’s Attorney, Prince George’s County, Maryland

Douglas Chin
Former Attorney General, Hawaii
Former Lieutenant Governor, Hawaii

John Choi
County Attorney, Ramsey County (St. Paul), Minnesota

Dave Clegg
District Attorney, Ulster County, New York

Shameca Collins
District Attorney, 6th Judicial District, Mississippi

Laura Conover
County Attorney, Pima County (Tucson), Arizona

John Creuzot
District Attorney, Dallas County, Texas

Satana Deberry
District Attorney, Durham County, North Carolina
Parisa Dehghani-Tafti  
Commonwealth’s Attorney, Arlington County and the City of Falls Church, Virginia

Steve Descano  
Commonwealth’s Attorney, Fairfax County, Virginia

Michael Dougherty  
District Attorney, 20th Judicial District (Boulder), Colorado

Mark Dupree  
District Attorney, Wyandotte County (Kansas City), Kansas

Matt Ellis  
District Attorney, Wasco County, Oregon

Keith Ellison  
Attorney General, Minnesota

Ramin Fatehi  
Commonwealth’s Attorney, City of Norfolk, Virginia

Kimberly M. Foxx  
State’s Attorney, Cook County (Chicago), Illinois

Glenn Funk  
District Attorney, Nashville, Tennessee

Gil Garcetti  
Former District Attorney, Los Angeles County, California

Kimberly Gardner  
Circuit Attorney, City of St. Louis, Missouri

Stan Garnett  
Former District Attorney, 20th Judicial District (Boulder), Colorado

José Garza  
District Attorney, Travis County (Austin), Texas

Sarah F. George  
State’s Attorney, Chittenden County (Burlington), Vermont

Sim Gill  
District Attorney, Salt Lake County, Utah
Terry Goddard  
Former Attorney General, Arizona

Joe Gonzales  
District Attorney, Bexar County (San Antonio), Texas

Deborah Gonzalez  
District Attorney, Western Judicial Circuit (Athens), Georgia

Eric Gonzalez  
District Attorney, Kings County (Brooklyn), New York

Mark Gonzalez  
District Attorney, Nueces County (Corpus Christi), Texas

Christian Gossett  
Former District Attorney, Winnebago County, Wisconsin

Andrea Harrington  
District Attorney, Berkshire County, Massachusetts

Scott Harshbarger  
Former Attorney General, Massachusetts  
Former District Attorney, Middlesex County, Massachusetts

Jim Hingeley  
Commonwealth’s Attorney, Albemarle County, Virginia

John Hummel  
District Attorney, Deschutes County, Oregon

Elizabeth K. Humphries  
Commonwealth’s Attorney, City of Fredericksburg, Virginia

Natasha Irving  
District Attorney, 6th Prosecutorial District, Maine

Justin F. Kollar  
Former Prosecuting Attorney, County of Kaua‘i, Hawaii

Lawrence S. Krasner  
District Attorney, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Rebecca Like  
Prosecuting Attorney, County of Kaua‘i, Hawaii
Brian S. Mason  
District Attorney, 17th Judicial District, Colorado

Beth McCann  
District Attorney, 2nd Judicial District (Denver), Colorado

Karen McDonald  
Prosecuting Attorney, Oakland County, Michigan

Ryan Mears  
Prosecuting Attorney, Marion County (Indianapolis), Indiana

Brian Middleton  
District Attorney, Fort Bend County, Texas

Stephanie Morales  
Commonwealth’s Attorney, Portsmouth, Virginia

Marilyn Mosby  
State’s Attorney, Baltimore City, Maryland

Jody Owens  
District Attorney, Hinds County (Jackson), Mississippi

Alonzo Payne  
Former District Attorney, 12th Judicial District (San Luis), Colorado

Jim Petro  
Former Attorney General, Ohio

Joseph Platania  
Commonwealth’s Attorney, City of Charlottesville, Virginia

Harold F. Pryor  
State Attorney, 17th Judicial Circuit (Fort Lauderdale), Florida

Karl A. Racine  
Attorney General, District of Columbia

Ira Reiner  
Former District Attorney, Los Angeles County, California
Former City Attorney, Los Angeles, California

Stephen Rosenthal  
Former Attorney General, Virginia
Marian Ryan  
District Attorney, Middlesex County, Massachusetts

Dan Satterberg  
Prosecuting Attorney, King County (Seattle), Washington

Eli Savit  
Prosecuting Attorney, Washtenaw County (Ann Arbor), Michigan

Mike Schmidt  
District Attorney, Multnomah County (Portland), Oregon

Carol Siemon  
Prosecuting Attorney, Ingham County (Lansing), Michigan

Eric Sparr  
District Attorney, Winnebago County, Wisconsin

David Sullivan  
District Attorney, Northwestern District, Massachusetts

Raúl Torrez  
District Attorney, Bernalillo County (Albuquerque), New Mexico

Suzanne Valdez  
District Attorney, Douglas County (Lawrence), Kansas

Matthew Van Houten  
District Attorney, Tompkins County, New York

Cyrus R. Vance  
Former District Attorney, New York County (Manhattan), New York

Lynneice Washington  
District Attorney, Jefferson County, Bessemer District, Alabama

Jared Williams  
District Attorney, Augusta, Georgia

Monique H. Worrell  
State Attorney, 9th Judicial Circuit (Orlando), Florida