

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/dispatches-from-germany/what-german-prisons-do-differently>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

I'll never forget it.

My colleagues from Vera and I were wrapping up our visit to Jugendanstalt Hameln, a correctional facility for young men up to 25 years old in the German state of Lower Saxony. I was standing at a table eating a sandwich and making conversation with a corrections official. A young man, incarcerated at the prison and being trained in culinary service, came by to refill our water glasses.

The official started conversing with him in German. Not speaking German, I didn't understand a single word. But, unexpectedly, the official's face began to glow and I became curious.

The corrections official was Christiane Jesse, the director general of prison administration for Lower Saxony—the equivalent of a U.S. state commissioner of corrections. It's a hefty title with a hefty set of responsibilities. And yet, here she was smiling so wide and shaking the young man's hand with such joy. It seemed like she was congratulating him, wishing him the best. And without missing a beat, she turned to me and said, in English, "He's being released in a week. She told me all about the young daughter and wife awaiting him, and how he wants to pursue his passion of being an opera singer."

I was struck not only by the mutual respect, but also by the familiarity, the sincerity, and the hope.

This moment, however small, highlighted a critical difference between German prisons and American ones: the human connection.

We tried explaining the American tragedy of prisons to our German friends: That every aspect of the American prison system is designed to dehumanize—starting with rules forbidding people who work in prisons from getting to know those who are forced to live there; and that interactions like the one between Christiane and the young man are rare.

Every time we spoke of American prison conditions, the German officials, as well as incarcerated people, would pause and look at each other. They were stunned.

You need to learn from us. Your laws are dangerous! exclaimed a 22-year-old incarcerated young man in Berlin. Nobody is born criminal.

Susanne Gerlach, director general of prison administration for the state of Berlin, said, "It is unforgivable. I don't think that I would want any responsibility in a system like that."

We were surprised to hear this from a high-ranking official, but she wasn't alone. We heard similar responses everywhere we went in Germany—from the officials, to the frontline officers and staff, to the incarcerated young people—all of whom responded to our description of American prisons, and their foundations of punishment and retribution, with horror.

We are a prison and people here have made failed decisions, said Nico, a social worker at Jugendanstalt Hameln. But they are humans. He said this as young incarcerated men roamed freely behind him going about their daily business. It was incredible.

I thought to myself, this is just what human dignity looks like, sounds like, and feels like. It was real and it was genuine. And it was in a prison, of all places.

Learn more by listening to Vera Research Director Ryan Shanahan discuss the German principle of relational safety (below):

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