

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/how-should-probation-and-parole-define-success>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

For over a decade, Vera has worked with the city of New Orleans to reduce their jail population. As a program associate with [Vera New Orleans](#), I'm proud to be a part of this effort. Before joining Vera's New Orleans team, I was a probation and parole officer with the State of Louisiana's Department of Corrections. During this time, I amassed countless hours of training in firearms and defensive tactics. I always made my required contacts with my clients every month and tried my best to be fair and reasonable. However, while my overall performance was rated as successful, I feel that too many of my clients still failed to complete their term of supervision. Shouldn't that mean, in a way, that I also failed as an officer?

I remember supervising a young mother who was placed on probation after pleading guilty to drug possession charges. She was required to submit to random drug screens and, after testing positive for drugs a third time, I offered her a choice: either complete a stint in inpatient treatment or I would request that her sentencing judge revoke her probation. If revoked, she would be facing a five-year sentence in prison, so understandably she chose inpatient treatment over a violation hearing. Around two weeks later, I was notified by the treatment facility that she had left the facility without their permission, and never returned. Afterwards, she made no attempts to contact me, and after making several attempts to contact her, I requested a warrant for her arrest. I felt justified: I thought I had given her a fair chance and she dishonored our agreement. When I eventually managed to locate her, I felt satisfied knowing that she would face justice for violating her probation and for breaking my trust.

The night my fellow officers and I arrested this young woman, she was at home with her daughter, who slept peacefully even as we searched their home for drugs. While waiting for a family member to take custody of the child, I remember the child's mother tearfully asking me if her daughter could hug her before she left. I gave her permission and watched this child wrap her tiny arms around her mother, whose hands were cuffed behind her back and unable to hug her daughter back. My realization of how this night would affect the lives of this family overshadowed any other feelings of broken trust or accomplishment.

If this case were judged by its outcome, it would be a failure. [A mother was taken from her child](#), and the state with the [highest incarceration rate in the nation](#) gained another prisoner. I've often wondered whether the outcome would've been different if I had been as diligent in accurately [assessing her risks and needs](#) and offering services based on that assessment as I was in tracking her down and arresting her.

Through the [Bureau of Justice Assistance's Justice Reinvestment Initiative](#) (JRI), the state of Louisiana is working towards the goal of reducing its extraordinarily high prison population. On March 16, 2017, the JRI task force finalized a [multi-strategy approach to incarceration reduction](#), which includes strengthening community supervision by reducing supervision terms and improving the use of sanctions and incentives.

Ultimately, the success of those who are supervised in the community will need to be emphasized for probation and parole agencies, this may require that they shoulder the responsibility of their failures. This could begin, for example, by having administrators analyze success and failure rates for districts and individual officers. More importantly, probation and parole officers should not just carefully consider the fates of those they supervise, but also the impact on their families and communities.

SPECIAL REPORT (STORIES)

PUBLICATION

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