

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/breaking-point/embracing-a-public-health-approach-to-justice-reform>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

My adolescence and young adulthood were largely shaped by negative forces: community disinvestment, mass incarceration, a failed War on Drugs, and its accompanying neglect of public health. The punishing circumstances of my youth were only matched by the harsh conditions of my incarceration, and upon my exit from prison in 2000, I resolved to dedicate myself to improving those early life-shaping forces.

Public health, in particular, has become a critical lens for both understanding the harm inflicted by our criminal justice policies and developing the means for reforming them. Principally, the public health approach advocates for the adoption of policies that recognize that treatment and rehabilitation not punitive action are more effective responses to people with mental illness and drug addiction. Currently, the United States incarcerates [ten times](#) as many people with serious psychiatric conditions than it treats in state mental hospitals. Equally troubling, the War on Drugs continues to yield high volumes of arrests for minor drug crimes irrespective of rates of drug use, and in spite of the fact that its punitive tactics exacerbate many of the problems it purports to address.

The current model is a clear policy and moral failure. More than just a framework for addressing individual prevention and treatment though crucially important a public health approach forces us to consider the needs of the people and communities most impacted by mass incarceration in our reform efforts.

Moreover, not only is the public health approach supported by the evidence, but it has the added benefit of bringing rationality to a system of devastating irrationality. In no other area of public policy are the data so largely ignored and the consequences greeted with such wanton dismissal. For instance, we know that incarceration is, at its core, a public health issue that exacerbates already-existing health disparities. Employing heavy-handed punitive measures in the communities most impacted by incarceration only serves to further entrench such disparities. As individuals and families are destabilized, the health of the entire community is compromised as neighborhoods are fragmented both civically and economically. By devoting a larger share of our resources to public health, human impact becomes central to our treatment of social problems. This realignment of priorities is significant to a system with a formidable record of deepening human misery. It allows us to begin the process of restoring what current criminal justice policies have left devastated.

Consistently, however, I am troubled by the lack of formerly incarcerated people being called to the table. Despite being many of the best and the brightest people that I know, my peers largely remain relegated to roles of service provision or symbolism. I founded JustLeadershipUSA (JLUSA) in 2013 to prove that *those closest to the problem are closest to the solution*.

Our goal is equally direct, even if audacious: halving the prison population by 2030. In order to achieve our #halfby2030 goal, our members are organizing campaigns and events to raise awareness of the issues surrounding incarceration. [Being a member](#) means being an agent for change, helping to redefine justice in America and make decarceration the process of reducing both our prison population and our dependence on incarceration a reality, all while enhancing public safety. Decarceration is not only central to JLUSA's goal, but by being based on a commitment to rehabilitation and community empowerment, it also corresponds with public health-centered policy reform.

Improving the health of those most impacted by incarceration is central to this vision. Indeed, the success of our efforts must be grounded in and measured against the well-being of these communities, lest we repeat the policy failures of the past and present.

Vera is pleased to complement the WNYC broadcast, *Breaking Point: New York's Mental Health Crisis*, with [a blog series](#) that features the voices of experts from a range of fields as they examine how the nexus of poverty, mental health, and the criminal justice system affects nearly every aspect of New York City life.

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