

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/guest-post-rethinking-re-entry>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

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One of the most critical moments for public safety is when a person re-joins his or her community after spending time in prison or jail. We know from decades of experience and research that providing basic reentry services—behavioral health treatment, job skills training, educational programming, and housing assistance, among other interventions—is one of the smartest and most cost effective things we can do to keep our communities safe.

We think we're being tough on crime when we lock people up. It sounds logical: people who commit crime are arrested, given a mandated sentence, and then released when their time is served. The problem is, the majority of people released (an astounding 7 out of 10, at last count) land back in jail or prison within 3 years. Incarceration itself has become a risk factor for future crime. Add to this the high cost of incarceration (prison costs more than an Ivy League school) and Californians have to ask: is simply locking people up actually being smart on safety?

Here is a better way: re-entry services save money and keep communities safer and healthier. The nationally-known Vera Institute of Justice [recently talked](#) with people coming out of the Los Angeles county jail, the largest jail system in the country. Of the people they talked to, 73% of inmates report securing a job as their top priority upon leaving jail, 34% said securing housing, and 33% planned to get help with substance use. Providing services like this to help people stay away from crime isn't about going easy on criminals; it's about smart solutions that benefit the whole community. If an individual can get treatment for substance use, they're much less likely to end up homeless or commit another crime. And they're much less likely to have taxpayers foot the bill for more jail time.

Despite the high demand for services, the supply falls desperately short. The Vera Institute report found that only 6 out of 80 people interviewed in Los Angeles County jails received reentry services, and only 26 were even aware that reentry services were available. The same study found that the Community Transition Unit (CTU), which is responsible for reentry services in the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department (LASD), is severely underfunded, with only one staff member for every 1,000 inmates. Other major challenges included inadequate coordination between LASD, other government agencies, and community-based service providers, who face difficulty in receiving permission and funds to provide services within jails. With more than 160,000 people passing through the L.A. County jail system annually, this is a giant missed opportunity.

To improve this situation, the study's recommendations include expanded outreach about reentry services, the creation of targeting and triage systems, the development of individualized reentry plans, and standardized processes and evaluation components for all reentry programs. These recommendations are based on plain common sense, and an understanding that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. The lock 'em up approach doesn't work. We need solutions that are cost-effective and that make all communities safer and healthier.

[Californians for Safety and Justice](#) is taking these recommendations to heart and working with Los Angeles policymakers to increase re-entry services and create more safety for our communities. Take the safety pledge and join them [here](#).

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