

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/two-oscar-nominated-films-show-the-need-for-compassionate-reentry-and-diversion-programs>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

This year, two Academy Award-nominated short subject documentary films detail two of the most important moments in a persons involvement in the criminal justice system: entry and release.

[Heroin\(e\)](#) focuses on jail diversion and treatment opportunities for people suffering from opioid dependence, while [Knife Skills](#) focuses on formerly incarcerated people as they navigate the world of reentrytwo critical criminal justice issues featured in our [recent State of Justice Reform report](#). However, a common thread runs through both films: one of hope.

Netflix-produced Heroin(e) follows three womenFire Chief Jan Rader, Judge Patricia Keller, and Necia Freeman of Brown Bag Ministriesin their fight to turn the tide on the nationwide opioid epidemic in their town of Huntington, West Virginia. As the film notes, Huntington is the overdose capital of the worldand has been for some timeseeing 10 times the national average of overdoses in 2015 alone. The gravity of the epidemic in Huntington hits the viewer hardest during a moment in a convenience store when a man, standing over the body of an overdosed woman, tells the cameraman, It doesnt shock me anymore. Yet, despite the grave subject matter, Heroin(e) manages to tell a compassionate story about the importance of factoring human dignity in the fight against addiction.

Human dignityand the importance of providing hope and opportunity in the face of such challengesalso informs the story behind Knife Skills. Knife Skills documents the hectic days leading up to the opening of a new Cleveland-based French restaurant called Edwins. Edwins hires formerly incarcerated people and teaches them the very basics of French cuisineeverything from the art of julienning to creating successful wine pairings. The people hired through Edwins Leadership and Training Institute have never had any kind of culinary experience. Yet, in Edwins, they find an outlet that supports them in their reentry efforts. Some forge ahead until the end of the six-month program to see graduation day, while others do not make it throughwith a handful of people coming back into contact with the justice system.

Many factors can reduce the success of reentry for individuals who are formerly incarcerated, especially within the first yearone of them being lack of employment opportunities and steady income. Indeed, with more than 650,000 people released from prison each year and an estimated 9 million people released from jail, reentry can be an incredibly daunting challenge, especially for those who lack a support system.

Both Heroin(e) and Knife Skills do not shy away from the fact that there may be setbacks to peoples recovery. In fact, they embrace this fact and use their stories to offer a hopeful and redemptive counter-narrative that highlights their triumphsmaking a compelling case for compassion in how we dispense justice and fairness.

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