

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/dignity-for-all-my-internship-vera-institute>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

As I sat in the lobby at the Vera Institute of Justice last November, awaiting my interview for a communications internship, I felt horribly unprepared.

My hair was combed, I had arrived 15 minutes early, and I was even wearing a tie. But there was still one problem: I knew almost nothing about criminal justice. As I scrambled around the Vera website, trying to cram last-minute facts and figures about criminal justice reform that I could use as talking points, I felt a sudden pang of embarrassment not only was I about to let my interviewers down, I had, one could even accuse, let my own country down.

Indifference was not the only reason for my lack of knowledge on the area. Having always been taught, during my sheltered middle class upbringing, that jail was where society's bad eggs went, I hastily turned a blind eye to any person or event related to crime.

A few weeks later, I was shocked to discover that I had been offered the opportunity to join Vera's Communications team in the spring.

On my first day of work, many of my preconceptions about criminal justice were immediately shattered. I learned that Vera was, first and foremost, ardently committed to representing people involved with the justice system not as the criminals or convicts society wanted to define them as, but as the inherently worthy human beings they were. Serving to codify this people-first policy was a 78-page document I was asked to read that detailed all the careful instructions I had to follow when writing any tweet, publishing any graphic, or drafting any message. Instead of convict, the words *person* in prison or jail were preferred. A prisoner was instead a *person* who is incarcerated. Instead of offender, it was *person* convicted of a crime.

From every task I worked on, I learned something new about criminal justice. Reading through and writing briefs for some of Vera's research reports, for example, allowed me to picture the actual scope of the problem with America's justice system. I already knew that this country jailed its black American citizens at a disproportionately high rate, but knowing that this rate [was four times that of white Americans](#) was somehow more alarming. I could probably guess solitary confinement sounded brutal, but learning that [an average solitary confinement cell was smaller than a standard parking space](#) added insult to injury.

Nevertheless, my experience at Vera constantly reaffirmed the truth I had found so eye-opening from the outset that even those whom society may think are beyond repair are in fact capable of self-control, rationality, and improvement just by virtue of being human. It is this principle that [underlies and fuels Vera's optimistic vision](#) for a new American justice system, one that is already being realized by our Northern European neighbors and gradually being adopted by U.S. prisons. [In Germany, I learned](#), incarcerated people are allowed to wear normal clothes and prepare their own meals. [In one Connecticut correctional unit](#), incarcerated young men and correctional officers are free to interact and support each other, while cell doors remain open for 13 hours each day. This respect for the dignity of those individuals involved in the justice system calls to mind a quote from Norwegian prison governor Tom Eberhardt: Treat people like dirt, and they will act like dirt. Treat people like human beings, and they will act like human beings.

Indeed, this model [proves very effective in reducing rates of recidivism and prison violence where implemented](#). In spite of what I'd been led to believe prior to working here that people behind bars are irredeemable and dangerous to society, I learned that prisons are actually just facilities holding people who need time and room to grow, including people who were never really given a chance to succeed in the first place. More shockingly, [60 percent of those held in jail have not been convicted of any crime](#), and are simply awaiting trial, often because they cannot afford bail.

I came to understand *justice* no longer as exacting retribution, but as instead granting another chance at life to any individual who needs it, whether this looks like forgiving low-level offenses, reorienting prisons to educate and rehabilitate, or providing support for reintegration back into society after incarceration. It is a system of seeing the potential in others, the same way Vera saw the potential in me.

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