

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/beyond-second-chance-month>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

[More than 600,000 Americans return home from prison each year](#) across the country to rejoin society with a desire to rebuild their lives.

Yet, too often we close doors to this entire population as they grapple with the challenges that come with reentering their communities. Through barriers to things like housing, education, and employment, a formerly incarcerated person's punishment can continue long after they've repaid their debt to society.

Not only can this have a devastating effect on a person's reentry process, it can [increase their chances of recidivating](#) leading to a cycle of reincarceration. In fact, [nearly 70 percent of formerly incarcerated people](#) are re-arrested within three years of their release. Even more striking, [nearly 60 percent of formerly incarcerated people](#) who are homeless because of barriers to housing are rearrested within the very first year after being released.

This Second Chance Month and beyond, we must renew our commitment to welcoming back and supporting these individuals. Organizations like [Prison Fellowship](#), a faith-based restorative organization which supports those affected by incarceration, are leading this commitment. The biggest foundational problem of the criminal justice system is that the public has allowed the government to accept failure, says Craig DeRoche, senior vice president of advocacy and public policy at Prison Fellowship.

Prison Fellowship led a massive and successful campaign of over 150 organizations to have April proclaimed as Second Chance Month by the federal government and numerous jurisdictions, a moment to not only highlight the challenges that formerly incarcerated people face, but also to address them. The criminal justice system is supposed to allow people to move forward as a good citizen, says DeRoche. What we've done is that we've eliminated or made extremely difficult the ability for people to move forward in their life. We hurt our communities and end up contributing to more crime.

Prison Fellowship has a number of programs aimed at not just guiding incarcerated people through individual transformation, but also mobilizing a national network to fight for restorative justice reform. We're not just talking theory. We're doing the difficult work, says DeRoche. Through its [Academies](#), Prison Fellowship has been helping incarcerated individuals prepare for reentry in 78 prisons across 27 states with a goal of working in more than 175 prisons in all 50 states in the next eight years.

Beyond individual transformation, Prison Fellowship is working toward cultural transformation as well inside prisons. Its [Warden Exchange Program](#) trains wardens in prisons throughout the country to change the culture inside their walls from one that is punitive to one that is restorative. We believe prison should be an opportunity for people to learn to do social good and learn social citizen skills so behavior can change when they leave, says DeRoche.

And there's evidence that in expanding opportunities to incarcerated people, Prison Fellowship has been able to disrupt the cycle of reincarceration after release. Indeed, the Minnesota Department of Corrections, which partners with Prison Fellowship, found that graduates [of Prison Fellowship's programs had a recidivism rate of 0.8 percent, compared to Minnesota's state average of 40 percent](#).

As we close Second Chance Month, we must take a hard look at how we treat those who have repaid their debt to society beyond the month of April and continue the work of providing them with opportunities that support their reentry process. Opening doors to education, employment, public housing, and more are all ways in which we can help people heal, rebuild their lives, and get back on their feet. Criminal justice should be a values discussion, not a partisan discussion, says DeRoche. We need to return the criminal justice system to a system of values that has united Americans.

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