

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/d%C3%A9j%C3%A0-vu-all-over-again>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

On Thursday I attended a discussion convened by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, which just released the summer issue of *Daedalus* on the subject of mass incarceration. The journals guest editors, Harvard sociologist Bruce Western and Brown University economist Glenn Loury, issued a warning.

Though economic pressures crack open a window of opportunity to change the way we use our prisons and jails, the danger is that once the economy gets better, the window will lower or bang shut without necessarily changing the way people fundamentally approach crime and punishment. To put it more bluntly, if we had enough money, would most Americans be okay with locking so many people up?

Their remarks, along with similar points raised in Marie Gottschalk's article in *Daedalus*, "Cell blocks and red ink: mass incarceration, the great recession and penal reform," led me to think about a [2002 Vera report](#) titled *Is the Budget Crisis Changing the Way We Look at Sentencing and Incarceration?* Is this *dj vu* all over again? Does the same question apply now and is the answer, pessimistically, No? Are we slashing corrections budgets just because we're forced to be penny-pinchers?

Let me answer my own, somewhat rhetorical, questions. I agree that budget concerns can provide the motivation for changing how we deal with sentencing and corrections, and that focusing solely on the monetary burden of running prisons and jails is insufficient to create smart, sustainable changes. But I think we're in a different situation than we were a few years ago.

What we've been hearing more and more in the criminal justice field is a discussion not just about reducing spending, but also about how research and practice demonstrate that we can use fewer taxpayer dollars and be more effective and have better outcomes like less recidivism. That is, we can increase public safety even as we decrease spending, as long as we direct our dollars wisely. We know more now, for instance, about what works in helping people change their behaviors, how to assess and target criminogenic needs, and how to supervise people on parole and probation based on risk levels. And we have states like Michigan, Kansas, and Texas that are putting into practice what is known to work.

As approaches like [cost-benefit analysis](#) begin to gain more traction in the realm of justice policy making, we also have more opportunities, as Bruce Western puts it, to thicken the notion of public safety as a good that is not produced by punishment alone. As my former colleague Don Stemen wrote in the [2007 Vera report](#) *Reconsidering Incarceration: New Directions for Reducing Crime*, Public safety cannot be achieved only by responding to crime after it occurs; research shows that it may also depend on protecting people against those factors that have been shown to be associated with high crime rates, such as unemployment, poverty, and illiteracy. As state policymakers continue to feel pressure to introduce measures to keep crime rates low, they would therefore do well to look beyond incarceration for alternative policies that not only may be able to accomplish the important task of protecting public safety, but may do so more efficiently and more effectively.

Dj vu or an idea whose time has come? I'm banking on the latter.

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