

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/hard-time-in-north-korea>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Two American journalists were sentenced yesterday to 12 years in North Korean prison. If diplomatic efforts to free them are unsuccessful, they are sure to do some seriously hard time.

A [Time](#) story relates some of the harsh conditions Laura Ling and Euna Lee are likely to face once inside. The anecdotes that have managed to emerge from the system are chilling. One survivor of a North Korean prison camp told, for example, of a small girl who was beaten to death for hiding grains of wheat in her pocket. And these are only the stories that have gotten out. According to the news report, scholars estimate that only 50 percent of prisoners survive their first year.

Reflecting on these conditions makes me appreciate how far the corrections profession in the U.S. has come in the past few decades. Active professional organizations such as the American Correctional Association, the National Commission on Correctional Health Care, the American Jail Association, and the International Community Corrections Association, to name just a few, have done much to promote a culture of humane conditions for prisoners and officers alike.

Yet even with these accomplishments, the U.S. corrections system still has a lot of room for improvement. For one thing, the United States incarcerates more people per capita than any other country in the world, and at the highest rate in American history. In 2008, we hit an all-time high: [one in 100 people are behind bars in this country](#) (pdf). The plight of the incarcerated mentally ill is also troubling. A recent congressional briefing of a [Justice Center study](#) (pdf) revealed that 16.9 percent of people admitted to jail met the study's criteria for serious mental illnesses. That's 3 to 6 times the rate found in the general population. Corrections staff often find themselves ill-prepared to handle a complicated and difficult population, leading to the use of techniques that may exacerbate prisoners' illnesses, such as [isolation](#) and the use of restraints.

These challenges, among others identified by the [Commission on Safety and Abuse in America's Prisons](#), provided inspiration for the project I work on at Vera, the [Corrections Support and Accountability Project](#). In this project, we are working with a select group of jurisdictions to help them improve the oversight, accountability, and transparency of their prisons and jails. It seems like North Korea could use a little help in that regard.

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