

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/vera-dares-to-ask-what-if>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

I'm thrilled to be writing my first Current Thinking blog post as Vera's president and to reflect on some of Vera's work this year and how closely it aligns with some unprecedented opportunities in criminal justice.

When I returned to Vera this summer after almost seven years away, I came back to the organization where I had grown as a professional—the place I had grown to love. It is where I spent close to a decade shaping projects that provide treatment for teens caught up in the juvenile justice system, help people returning from prison succeed in the community, and reduce the flow of people into prisons and improve the conditions for those in them.

What drew me back is not only the opportunity to tackle some of the most difficult problems of justice, but to do so in a way that is fiercely and unapologetically practical.

For decades, Vera has worked with its partners as leaders in proposing and implementing ideas that build a fairer society. But the very week I returned to Vera, Attorney General Eric Holder delivered a groundbreaking speech which made it clear that now is a particularly vital moment for our vision to bear fruit.

His speech at the American Bar Association's annual meeting in August in San Francisco was nothing short of a moral call to arms that observed a truth about mass incarceration which speaks to Vera's core mission: A vicious cycle of poverty, criminality, and incarceration traps too many Americans and weakens too many communities. And many aspects of our criminal justice system may actually exacerbate these problems, rather than alleviate them.

He's right. Unjust and ineffective mass incarceration together with its collateral consequences is truly one of the tragedies of our age. Our nation's prison population grew to 1.4 million in 2012, a 700 percent increase over four decades without bringing commensurate returns in public safety. This increase takes a disparate toll on communities of color. It is stupefying that an African American baby boy, born in 2001, has a one-in-three chance of spending time in prison in his lifetime. A Latino baby boy, a one-in-six chance.

I believe this is something we can change but we need to act on the energy of this moment. For starters, I'll highlight three ways Vera is asking what if we could curtail the damage of mass incarceration:

Over the next month, we're trying to raise awareness around this moment and these projects as well as raise the funds we need to continue and expand this work. I very much want to hear what you think about this direction. Have ideas? Questions? Leave a comment below, and in the coming weeks I'll respond as well as provide more detail about the programs mentioned above.

Thank you, and it's an honor to be working with you.

Transformative change, sent to your inbox.

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