

# Vera Institute of Justice

## Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/target-2020/federal-leadership-needed-to-transform-conditions-of-confinement>

### Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Six hundred thousand that's the approximate number of people in the United States who will return to their community from prison every year. Another way to look at it is that 95 percent of those who are currently incarcerated will be released. How then are prisons preparing people to transition back into their communities? They're not.

Mass incarceration is both a symptom and a cause of broader systemic issues plaguing our society. If we look back at and analyze the country's history of slavery and racial oppression, it becomes evident that our justice system is built upon historical injustices. And though [Amendment XIII](#) abolished slavery, one exception remained: as a punishment for crime. This allowed criminal justice systems to become the new means of habitual racial oppression after the Civil War. State legislatures adopted Black Codes and implemented convict leasing to ensnare Black people, subsequently laying the foundation for today's justice systems.

Prisons across the United States, at the state and federal level, are designed to deny human dignity. They prevent connection to community and family outside the walls; they warehouse people in cramped, unhealthy places devoid of natural light, fresh air, and healthy food; they traumatize not only incarcerated people, but [correctional staff](#) and administrators; and they continue to overuse punitive practices such as restrictive housing (also known as solitary confinement or segregation). These factors contribute to high recidivism and re-incarceration rates: an [estimated 68 percent](#) of people released from prisons are arrested within three years, 79 percent within six years, and 83 percent within nine years.

Conditions inside jails and prisons do more harm than healing. For those behind the walls, trauma and victimization are widespread, with rates of assault [10 times](#) greater than that found in the community. Myriad issues with policy and practice foster this system of violence. First, many prisons are severely overcrowded, with the number of people incarcerated far exceeding the number of available beds. In 2017, the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) and 13 state prison systems were [housing more than the maximum number](#) of people their facilities could hold: the three highest being Nebraska (127 percent), Iowa (115 percent), and the BOP (114 percent). Second, despite the long-standing claim that prisons are meant to *rehabilitate* people convicted of crimes, the lack of programs is shocking. In a recent report by the U.S. Department of Justice, [49 percent](#) of people in BOP custody completed zero programming while incarcerated; even worse, 82 percent had not participated in a single technical or vocational course. Third, [61,000 of 1.5 million people](#) in U.S. prisons in 2017 were held in solitary confinement, where they were restricted to a tiny cell for at least 22 hours a day with no access to programming or treatment and minimal human interaction.

For [Shyquinn Dix](#), it was 23 hours a day. He entered the Cheshire Correctional Institute in Connecticut at the age of 22, feeling scared and confused. Recounting his experience behind bars, he wrote, "I felt sick and thought about giving up on my life multiple times. That all changed for Shyquinn when he was accepted into the prisons T.R.U.E. Unit, part of Vera's [Restoring Promise](#) initiative, a pilot project based on models from nations such as Germany and Norway that are rooted in human dignity. After a year in T.R.U.E., Shyquinn was released early, and he's now a basketball player at the University of Maine-Presque Isle, where he is pursuing a bachelor's degree in sociology."

But not everyone is afforded the same opportunity. Unfortunately, thousands of people are released every year from solitary [straight to the community](#); not only have they received little if any preparation for reentry, but the conditions in which they were held are associated with long-term physical and mental health problems that can make successful reentry nearly impossible.

Solutions to these problems *do* exist. To achieve meaningful reform, an array of policies and practices that center human dignity must be adopted:

If we want to prepare people for success as they return home, we must provide environments that are humane, create a society that believes in second chances, and ensure that *respect* drives our reform efforts: a core value of both [Vera](#) and the [BOP's](#) mission.

PUBLICATION

PUBLICATION

PUBLICATION

Transformative change, sent to your inbox.

Vera Institute of Justice. All rights reserved.