

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/faces-of-an-era>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

For more years than we care to remember, politicians had just one choice when it came to criminal justice issues: they had to be tough on crime. The faces of that tough-on-crime era included both criminals who committed heinous crimes (such as Willie Horton) and victims of violent, often sexual crimes (such as seven-year-old Megan Kanka, whose murder prompted states to pass Megan's laws, which established sex offender registries). The framing of crime and victimization in this way contributed to the trend of viewing all criminal offenders the same, and it led to the adoption of extraordinarily harsh and inflexible sentencing policies, such as mandatory minimum sentences and three strikes laws.

Although the law should provide for the severe punishment of heinous acts, not all offenders are the same, and politicians no longer have to resort to just one policy choice. Today, policymakers can support one or some of several initiatives that advocate a different course including [Smart on Crime](#), [Right on Crime](#), or the [Campaign to End Mass Incarceration](#).

Along with a wider universe of policy options comes a new set of faces: offenders convicted of non-violent crimes but spending decades locked away in prison. The personal stories used by media outlets and advocacy campaigns demonstrate vividly how the criminal justice system can be at its most unfair and inefficient when individual circumstances are ignored. The Marshall Projects [Life Inside](#) series, the ACLU's [Living Death](#) campaign, and the Koch brothers-funded [Reform Criminal Justice Now](#) tell the stories of mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters. By focusing on people and not solely on criminal acts the new era of criminal justice reform humanizes the convicted, the criminal, the offender, and in so doing encourages policymakers, practitioners, and the public at large, to think and treat them with human dignity and respect.

The growing prevalence of this framing tactic supports, we believe, the position we advance in *Doing the Right Thing: The Evolving Role of Human Dignity in American Sentencing and Corrections*, an article published in the October 2014 issue of the [Federal Sentencing Reporter](#). The issue was devoted entirely to the [European-American Prison Project](#) a [Prison Law Office](#)-funded project managed by the Vera Institute of Justice that in 2013 brought U.S. corrections officials and other criminal justice stakeholders to Germany and the Netherlands to visit prisons there and study their approaches to punishment. In our article, we demonstrate that the principle of human dignity a notion at the heart of German and Dutch sentencing and corrections is gaining influence in the United States through recent legislative reform efforts as well as changes in correctional training and supervision practices.

The increasing use of personal stories in pursuit of reform bodes well for human dignity gaining a stronger foothold throughout the criminal justice system. Gone, we hope, is the era when we reduced all justice-involved people to the offenses they committed. By seeing the whole person behind the crime, there is a greater likelihood that the criminal justice system will sentence, treat, and supervise people in a more humane way.

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