

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/dispatches-from-germany-a-breath-of-fresh-air>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

It may sound like a small detail, but during the first of five days visiting German prisons, I was struck by the smell of fresh air. I am here for a week as part of Veras International Sentencing and Corrections Exchange project, and I have already seen many small details that form a clear picture of how different the German approach to incarceration is.

First, the fresh air. It is a luxury I find myself craving whenever I visit adult or juvenile prisons in the U.S. In most prisons I've visited, the windows are sealed shut and I often reflect on how hard that must be for the people incarcerated there. In the German prison I visited yesterday, however, the people incarcerated there each have their own room with a large window that they can open.

Another small detail we noticed was the incarcerated people's ability to take a shower whenever they wanted. In the U.S., it is more common for showers for incarcerated people to be strictly scheduled and often supervised. In German prisons, incarcerated people can make a whole host of small decisions for themselves, including what to have for dinner. They cook for themselves and are able to order fresh fruit and vegetables from commissary. In the U.S., I've only ever seen cup-of-noodle soup and chips or cookies for purchase. And instead of having phones only in the common areas of a living unit, German prisons provide phones in every person's room. This allows people to call home whenever they want, if they can afford the charge of about 10 cents a minute.

These small details are all part of the German human rights-based philosophy that, even though the state took away a person's liberty for committing a crime, it did not take away his or her dignity.

I must treat them like human beings, the leader of the first German prison we visited tried to explain to me, probably because I looked so confused and shocked about the rights of people in her custody. They are incarcerated and that is punishment enough. We have so many rules they must follow so we try to allow them to make as many decisions for themselves as possible.

Her simple statement reminded me of the everyday decisions that I take for granted: what to eat, when to shower, which friend or loved one I'd like to call. That people in U.S. prisons are routinely denied. Even the simple choice of being able to open the window to get some fresh air.

The author, front left, walks through JVA Heidering prison in Berlin with facility Governor Anke Stein.

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