

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/a-producers-notebook-the-story-behind-justice-for-all>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Editor's note: Last year, Vera led a group of corrections leaders, government officials, activists, and others on a tour of prisons in Germany and Norway, to see what a criminal justice system rooted in human dignity looks like. Dateline NBC producer Dan Slepian accompanied Vera on this tour. Below, he shares his reflections from that trip and from his experience reporting for NBC's Justice For All, a week-long news segment with NBC Nightly News anchor Lester Holt, on how America can chart a new course to reimagine its justice system. The text from this article originally appeared on [NBC News](#).

It was the middle of the night, and I was staring at the chipped ceiling of my dimly lit cell inside the Louisiana State Penitentiary, also known as Angola.

It was hot, and loud, especially when a flushing toilet echoed down the hallway or when one of the men on the tier would scream out in the darkness.

Thoughts were circling my mind.

First, how in the world is Lester Holt, in the cell next to me, sleeping so soundly?

More important, I felt the weight of all those people I'd done stories about who have had to stare at a cement ceiling for years, especially those who don't belong in prison.

But I spent most of that sleepless night thinking about how I got here.

As a producer for "Dateline NBC" for more than two decades, I've witnessed how the criminal justice system operates, from nearly every perspective.

I've embedded with tenacious, hardworking homicide detectives in New York and Las Vegas as they investigate murders; I've interviewed brutal killers and spent countless hours visiting with grieving victims; I've covered dozens of trials, shadowing prosecutors determined to find justice, and public defenders fighting impossible odds; and I've conducted many investigations that have helped lead to the release of innocent people who were wrongfully convicted.

As a result, I've become a passionate student of the vast American criminal justice system. And unfortunately, what I've learned is that the system many believe is the best in the world is now in crisis: the policies and laws that were created to keep us safe have come to do exactly the opposite, according to many experts and politicians on both sides of the aisle.

The problem has come to be known as mass incarceration. The United States incarcerates more of its citizens than any other country on earth. While we represent about 5 percent of the world's population, we lock up more than 20 percent of all the prisoners in the world.

It wasn't always this way.

The birth of mass incarceration can be traced to the early 1970s, when President Richard Nixon declared a War on Drugs and demanded tough on crime policies. Politicians from both parties agreed and began to pass more punitive laws that sent more people to prison, for lesser crimes and longer periods of time. This trend continued for the next 40 years. Today, 2.2 million people are behind bars in America a 500 percent increase.

Now, America is having a reckoning with the rise of mass incarceration. There is broad agreement that the way we have chosen to administer justice is actually hurting society both financially and socially. We are spending billions of dollars, it's not making us any safer, it's tearing families apart, and it's disrupting entire communities.

So what have we been doing wrong? Why is reform so important? And what are the solutions?

One organization focused on answering those questions is the Vera Institute for Justice a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization focused on criminal justice reform.

Because of Lester's leadership and ongoing commitment to shining a light on the justice-related stories, last year the folks from Vera invited us to join a delegation of 40 officials from around the country to tour prisons in Germany and Norway. The theme was re-imagining prison. What I saw and learned on that trip floored me.

Those two countries viewed the purpose of prison primarily as an opportunity for rehabilitation, restoration, opportunity and hope. Prison officials over there treat the incarcerated with dignity and respect. Guards shake inmates' hands each morning. Inmates live in clean cells, with doors that close and actual furniture, and they learn new skills so they will have a trade when they are released. And to

be clear they will be released, just as 95 percent of the prisoners in the United States will be. Yet here, the focus of prison is, in most cases, punishment and not rehabilitation.

I came back from that trip highly motivated to take our criminal justice reporting to another level. Within hours of my flight landing in New York, I updated Lester on what I had learned and suggested that we pitch an NBC News/MSNBC initiative called Justice For All, where all of our shows could do stories on justice reform, all capped off by a town hall meeting at a maximum security prison. We met with Andy Lack, the chairman of NBC News, and he immediately gave us the green light.

So for the past 10 months, a team of people has been working to produce a host of stories that will hopefully help spark some conversations about the most pressing criminal justice issues of our day.

For our Friday night "Dateline" special, Life Inside, Lester spent two nights inside Angola, the largest maximum-security prison in America, to report from the front lines about why so many people have landed behind bars, what prison is like for the average inmate, and why many guards, wardens and corrections officials think we need to focus on increasing rehabilitation and reducing incarceration.

Justice For All culminates on Sunday with that MSNBC town hall meeting, which we filmed from Sing Sing Correctional Facility the first time such an event has taken place inside a maximum security prison. There, Lester interviewed leaders in the justice reform movement about what's wrong with our system and what can be done to fix it.

So what happens next? Hopefully, now that criminal justice reform has landed near the top of our national agenda, we will help spark a real conversation that leads to real change. Crime will never go away and criminals will always need to be dealt with, but maybe we can finally figure out how to do that in a way that returns them to society as productive neighbors.

As for me, I'm looking forward to doing more reporting and producing more stories that help motivate that conversation and lead to that change.

But first, I need to get a good night's sleep.

VIDEO

SPECIAL REPORT (CHAPTERED)

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