

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/what-we-hope-to-learn-from-european-prisons>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

The statistics by now are numbingly familiar. A quarter of the world's population behind bars is in the United States though we comprise but five percent of the world's population. There is a broad boundary-busting movement to change this reality its bipartisan, it involves people both inside and outside the criminal justice system, and it is headline news.

One boundary worth crossing in this effort is our borders. What are other countries the vast majority of whom have very low imprisonment rates doing and what might we learn from them?

Next week, a delegation from the U.S. is traveling to Germany to explore this question as part of the [International Sentencing and Corrections Exchange](#), a partnership between the [John Jay College of Criminal Justice](#) and Vera. We will tour prisons with our German hosts, and meet experts in sentencing, mental health, substance use treatment, corrections, reentry, juvenile justice, and human rights. We will also participate in a conference on the broader European perspective, featuring experts from the United Nations, Norway, Switzerland, and the Council of Europe.

This journey builds on a previous trip to Germany and the Netherlands in 2013, which was documented in our [report](#) (and featured in a *New York Times* [editorial](#)). That delegation included officials from Colorado, Georgia, and Pennsylvania, and [led to some real changes](#) back home.

This time, our delegation consists of a wide range of people among them corrections officials, philanthropists, an historian, people who are formerly incarcerated, district attorneys, scholars, faith leaders, a film producer, and other thought leaders from the right and the left. We all come with our particular areas of expertise but all share a desire to stretch our boundaries and learn from our European colleagues. We will be joined by media reporting on the trip, so watch for regular dispatches from reporter Maurice Chammah ([@MauriceChammah](#)) who will be blogging for [The Marshall Project](#) and [VICE News](#), and follow what we and the rest of the delegation experience at [#RethinkingPrisonsIntl](#).

To kick us off, here's a sampling of what some members of our delegation hope to learn and bring back with them to their work stateside:

"I look forward to meeting with officials and touring facilities in Germany. That country has seen their reoffend rate decline over the past several decades. As we work to create a Second Chance Society in Connecticut to re-integrate non-violent offenders back into our society and rejoin their neighbors and our economy, I look forward to learning how we can apply those lessons to our effort."

Dannel P. Malloy, Governor of Connecticut

The bottom line is that we have a high incarceration rate and a high rate of recidivism. Something is not working. It is my responsibility to look to other systems whether they are in another county, another state, or another country to see if there are better, more cost-efficient ways to make sure the public is safe.

Jeff Rosen, District Attorney, Santa Clara County

Tennessee's Department of Corrections mission is to operate safe and secure prisons while enhancing public safety. We all know that re-entry is a key component in reducing the recidivism rate and are always interested to see what best practices are being used in other facilities. This trip allows me to study the German correctional system and see if any of their practices would aid us in keeping our staff, inmates and the community safer.

Derrick Schofield, Commissioner, Tennessee Department of Correction

I am really excited to learn about the practices and policies that allow men and women to return to their communities with dignity and hope. I am looking forward to seeing what rehabilitative tools are used on the front end to ensure success on the back end of a prison sentence.

Shaka Senghor, Director of Strategy and Innovation, #cut50

This trip represents a tremendous opportunity to see firsthand a different model of incarceration that focuses far more on rehabilitation and productive work. While there are many differences between the U.S. and Western European criminal justice systems, including an exponentially higher incarceration rate in the U.S. that makes it more challenging to provide such individualized programming behind bars, I believe I will be better positioned to advise American policymakers on criminal justice policy after learning about some of the best practices in other advanced nations. After all, just as Ford keeps tabs on what BMW is doing in their effort to build the best cars, it only makes sense as we deal with the stubborn problem of recidivism to not confine our search for answers to the U.S. borders.

Marc Levin, Director, Center for Effective Justice at the Texas Public Policy Foundation and Policy Director of its Right on

Crime initiative

I hope to learn from both the German and American corrections professionals about new and better ways of administering prisons and rethinking the role of prisons in our democracies. I expect that many of my preexisting understandings will be challenged by this experience and some core values reinforced.

Jeremy Travis, President, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York

My hope for the trip is that it will be broadening, will open up a sense of *the possible* and will help us construct an affirmative vision of a different kind of justice. We tend to think of our systems and their features as exceptional and immutable, often even rejecting state-to-state comparisons: What works in Ohio won't work in Florida. Understandable, but limiting. But in an increasingly globalized world, it's an imperative that we look outwards and openly. Is it possible to have a prison system organized around successful socialization? Can a society punish without life sentences? Can you mete out discipline without the use of solitary confinement?

Nick Turner, President, Vera Institute of Justice

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