RESEARCH REPORT

BRENNAN CENTER FOR JUSTICE

Prison Reform in the United States

Efforts to Improve Conditions and Post-Release Outcomes

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Director's Note

Nearly two million people are incarcerated across a vast network of county jails and state and federal prisons in the United States. These facilities are not set up to address the circumstances that lead to crime: mental illness, substance abuse, and lack of housing, job skills, and education. Ninety-five percent of those behind bars will eventually return home, having received almost no programming or support to prepare them to successfully rejoin their communities.

Too often, prisons are isolating and inhumane places that fail at rehabilitation. They are also not healthy for corrections staff themselves. Correctional officers are overworked, underpaid, and laboring under intolerable work conditions. Safety concerns and stressful environments also contribute to corrections burnout, staffing shortages, and constant turnover. Our prisons, therefore, are deeply broken institutions that dehumanize everyone who walks through their gates.

But as this report makes clear, correctional leaders across a politically and geographically diverse set of states are rolling up their sleeves and reimagining what incarceration looks like for people behind bars and how working conditions can improve for staff and volunteers. They often work in partnership with advocates, researchers, incarcerated people, and nonprofits dedicated to upholding the dignity of people and staff in prison. Our research demonstrates that many of these reforms can reduce violence in prison, increase corrections staff satisfaction and retention, and improve post-release outcomes, contributing to better public safety. This work also reaffirms the importance of recognizing that everyone inside prison systems has the capacity for growth and positive change.

We hope this report inspires other correctional leaders interested in improving prisons, some of whom only have a short window of time to serve in the role. We also hope it inspires policymakers to better and more strategically fund correctional budgets and members of the business community to seek out new partnerships with departments of corrections. That way, key programming and reentry roles are not left vacant — and newly enacted reforms can far outlast the tenure of a particular correctional leader. These successful new approaches that reimagine incarceration can ensure that the people who work and live in our nation's correctional facilities are treated with dignity. And for those released from prison, these approaches will produce better opportunities to succeed in their communities, which is a benefit to us all.

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Introduction

Most Americans don't know what it's like inside the United States' 1,664 state and federal prisons.[1] Yet even those who believe the primary purpose of incarceration is to deter crime or to inflict punishment expect that people returning home from prison should be ready to be productive, law-abiding members of their communities. Indeed, a 2025 Brennan Center poll found that more than 80 percent of likely voters think that formerly incarcerated people deserve a second chance and can be prepared to reenter society through rehabilitative, educational, or vocational programs.[2]

Some correctional leaders are recognizing this and implementing innovative programs to set incarcerated people up for success. These reforms improve conditions for the people who live and work in prisons and, if adopted more widely, could also improve public safety.

But most prisons rarely offer such opportunities. Life behind bars is marked by social and physical isolation and punctuated by violence and brutality.[3] People who have regular contact with U.S. prisons — law enforcement officers, correctional staff, lawyers, academics, nonprofit leaders, volunteers, and of course those who have been incarcerated and their loved ones — have referred to them as "warehouses that degrade and brutalize" and places where people have been "thrown away."[4] Judges have described the conditions in some U.S. prisons as objectively inhumane, with one saying such conditions have "no place in civilized society."[5] As of February 2026, the Department of Justice had 43 open investigations into jails, prisons, or entire state correctional systems for constitutional violations relating to physical and sexual violence, sanitation problems, staffing deficiencies, inadequate medical and psychiatric care, overuse of solitary confinement, and crowding.[6] And as the Correctional Leaders Association has noted, the people who work in these systems suffer themselves.[7]

Former Chief Justice Warren E. Burger once opined: "To put a man behind walls to protect society and then not try to change him is to win a battle and lose a war."[8] None of the underlying personal, structural, and societal conditions that drive prison incarceration — such as poverty, mental illness, substance use, and lack of vocational skills or education — are addressed by incarceration alone.[9] Where rehabilitative programming does exist, limited resources often result in extensive wait lists for it.[10] The U.S. Chamber of Commerce identified this "patchwork programming" problem as early as 1971, but little progress has been made since.[11] Nonprofit organizations such as Prison Fellowship provide services that compensate for the lack of support people receive both during and after incarceration, but without political backing and increased funding, their work faces substantial limitations.[12] The 95 percent of people who return home will do so lacking the necessary tools to successfully reintegrate.[13] This harms not only these individuals but also their communities, which are often the most marginalized: Black, Latino, and poor.[14]

Still, there are signs that corrections practices in the United States can improve. This report describes innovations unfolding in states as varied as Maine, Michigan, North Dakota, and South Carolina. The leaders driving these reforms are moving beyond business-as-usual punitive policies and practices, which not only harm the people in their custody but also cultivate unhealthy, stressful, and often bleak working conditions for correctional officers, contributing to high attrition rates and elevated rates of post-traumatic stress disorder and suicide.[15]

These leaders are eager to test an alternative hypothesis: that a focus on rehabilitation rather than retribution will yield safer prisons, better post-release outcomes, and ultimately improved public safety. Their reforms approach this proposition from different angles. Some programs center on successful reentry into society; others expand educational offerings. Many new policies and practices posit that human dignity should be the guiding principle in how correctional officers interact with people in their custody and even in how housing units are designed.[16] Other initiatives focus on the well-being and professional development of people who work in prisons.[17]

While most of the programs are so far too limited in reach or too new to demonstrate a long-term measurable impact on recidivism, initial studies point to positive outcomes. For example, the Little Scandinavia reform unit at the Pennsylvania state prison in Chester had almost no violent episodes in 2024 even as other facilities across the state experienced a 22 percent leap in violence.[18] And 2019 graduates of the Vocational Village program in Michigan had a recidivism rate 6.5 percentage points lower than the state's overall rate that year.[19] Given their brief appointments, correctional leaders often have only a few years to make a real difference for their states. Early successes like these can provide policymakers with enough preliminary data to encourage them to pursue more complete transformations of correctional systems.

To explore how jurisdictions can adopt reforms, Brennan Center researchers interviewed correctional directors, operational staff, formerly and currently incarcerated people, nonprofit leaders who provide technical assistance to prison systems, and program funders. They emphasized the need to identify champions among prison and political leadership, to engage operational staff and incarcerated people in policy formation and implementation, and to leverage emerging data to build support for systemic change. Our research also pointed to the importance of a national network in which correctional leaders engaged in reform can share successes and learn from challenges.

Prison as we know it isn't working. It doesn't deliver safety inside or outside its walls, and endemic in-custody violence matched with persistently high recidivism rates suggests that it may even have the opposite effect. By failing to provide rehabilitation, prisons undermine public safety and community well-being. But correctional leaders are demonstrating that prisons do not have to be this way. This report aims to combat civic indifference and ignorance about the circumstances of those who live and work in prisons and show that change is possible. Nearly two million people are incarcerated in the United States, and 450,000 return home each year.[20] What happens behind prison walls ultimately affects all of us.

The Need for Prison Oversight

>> Transparency, oversight, and accountability are prerequisites for all well-run public institutions, but they are especially critical for ones in which authorities wield absolute power over individuals, such as prisons and jails. Effective prison oversight can help identify problems early, address misconduct, and improve the use of resources — enhancing safety for both staff and incarcerated people. In the context of reform, oversight is an essential ingredient to driving lasting change in U.S. prisons. It can exert sustained pressure to ensure that improvements are implemented and maintained with fidelity.

Beyond ensuring enforcement of laws and rules, oversight can help states and decision-makers identify moral or ethical challenges in these systems.[21] Federal litigation invoking the Eighth Amendment has historically been a powerful oversight tool; lawsuits have exposed inhumane conditions and forced prison systems into court-ordered reforms.[22] The Prison Law Office, led by Donald Specter, has spearheaded landmark cases such as *Brown v. Plata*, which revealed dangerously inadequate medical care in California prisons.[23]

But litigation is only responsive, not preventive. There is growing recognition that the watchful eyes of outsiders through regularized oversight and data collection are needed to truly transform prisons and jails. One institution leading the charge is the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs' Prison and Jail Innovation Lab, led by law professor Michelle Deitch.[24] By bridging academic research and practical policy implementation, it plays a central role in advancing better transparency and accountability in prison and jail settings. Meanwhile, the COVID Behind Bars Data Project, led by law professor Sharon Dolovich at the University of California, Los Angeles, has emerged as the leading clearinghouse for data around deaths in custody.[25] During the early stages of the pandemic, the university tracked infections and deaths in real time, filling a critical gap left by state and federal agencies.[26] This built on the work of Loyola law professor Andrea Armstrong, who in 2015 began creating public databases of in-custody deaths in prisons, jails, and youth facilities in Louisiana and South Carolina.[27]

Currently, 19 states and the District of Columbia have established prison oversight mechanisms such as independent ombuds offices, inspectors general, and bipartisan legislative committees.[28] On the federal level, the bipartisan Federal Prison Oversight Act, signed on July 25, 2024, requires regular risk-based inspections of all 122 federal prisons, public reporting of findings, and timely corrective action; it also created an independent ombudsman accessible via secure hotline and online form to investigate health, safety, welfare, and rights concerns.[29]

I. Unit-Based Projects

While facility security is the top concern for most prison officials, many aspire to help people lead productive and law-abiding lives after their release. They recognize that time inside prison rarely addresses the urgent unmet needs that bring people into contact with the criminal justice system in the first place.[30]

Over the past decade and a half, frustrated with persistently high recidivism rates, groups of American criminal justice leaders have traveled to European countries that use incarceration less frequently and have lower recidivism rates — primarily Germany, the Netherlands, and the Scandinavian nations — to study different approaches to imprisonment.[31] They've discovered that their prison systems have principles fundamentally different from those in the United States. Their laws and regulations assert that people in prison are, before all else, human beings with intrinsic worth.[32]

The very first article of Germany's constitution states categorically that "human dignity shall be inviolable" and that state authority has a duty to respect and protect this right.[33] This guiding principle has been interpreted to mean that incarcerated people retain the capacity to grow and change and that they have a right to education, health, and employment — the same rights as those in the wider community.[34] A successful return to society, not rote punishment or retribution, is the goal of this philosophy of incarceration.[35] The punishment is the restriction of liberty, not the imposition of additional suffering (as is often the reality in the United States).[36]

German and Scandinavian approaches in particular center the "normalization" principle: Prison life should resemble community life as much as possible. This is because long-term exposure to highly controlled environments, such as prisons, is associated with more, not less, criminal behavior, as well as psychological harms such as diminished capacity to make decisions, social withdrawal, hypervigilance, and low self-worth.[37] Instead, correctional leaders aim to produce calm, therapeutic, and humane environments that are laser-focused on rehabilitation, resocialization, and reentry.[38] Staff are encouraged to develop constructive and supportive relationships with residents, acting more as counselors than guards.[39] Another principle, "dynamic security," calls for positive relationships to reduce in-prison violence and misconduct and facilitate constructive change.[40] Other key aspects of incarceration include cognitive-behavioral therapy, which helps individuals recognize negative thought patterns and develop skills for positive change; wide access to education, vocational programs, mental health or substance use treatment options; and close connections to family and friends on the outside, which all contribute to reduced recidivism.[41]

Two Key Concepts

>> Amend, Little Scandinavia, and Restoring Promise are three reform initiatives that explicitly organize themselves around two key correctional principles borrowed from Scandinavia and Germany. Other initiatives, such as reform efforts in Maine, have been indirectly inspired by these concepts.

- **Dynamic security.** Most U.S. prisons focus on *static security*: physical barriers like doors, walls, and bars; and *organizational security*: the procedures used to manage correctional facilities. *Dynamic security* focuses on humane interactions that enable staff to have a better sense of residents' mental and emotional needs, allowing them to anticipate and prevent security risks rather than responding after an incident has occurred. This enables staff to more often serve as mentors rather than rule enforcers, which creates a mutually calm and mentally healthy atmosphere.

- **Normalization.** Although no institutional living environment can ever replicate what one may experience independently in one's own community, this principle introduces efforts to have life inside prisons resemble life outside as much as possible. Practices and policies that produce a more normalized environment can better prepare people to rejoin their communities safely and successfully.

These trips abroad helped seed a wide variety of initiatives seeking to promote a more humane and rehabilitation-focused model in the United States. Some notable efforts are the Vera Institute of Justice's Restoring Promise initiative, the Scandinavian Prison Project — a research collaboration between Drexel University and the University of Oslo — and Amend, a public health and human rights program that works with state prison systems to reduce the debilitating health effects of prisons on residents and staff, which include increased rates of depression, stress, anxiety, and injury, as well as reduced life expectancy.[42]

Changing institutional behavior wholesale can be difficult. The Restoring Promise and Scandinavian Prison Project teams started small, each with a single housing unit as the focal point for change. Incubating new approaches in this way allows for trial and error. It permits those responsible for these projects to develop, revise, and refine new policies and practices so that the model can be adapted to the specific needs and circumstances of the facility and the residents involved. Additionally, it provides project staff and participants the space to learn and grow, fostering a sense of ownership that encourages their investment in newly established norms and practices. The following sections describe the genesis of these two unit-based initiatives, examines key aspects of the models, and explores their potential.

The Restoring Promise Initiative

Restoring Promise is a Vera Institute of Justice initiative to transform prison cultures, climates, and spaces by partnering with correctional leaders to reimagine housing units for young adults between the ages of 18 and 25, realigning corrections policies and practices with a commitment to human dignity.[43]

The focus on youth was inspired by a 2015 trip to Germany, where people aged 18 to 21 are often adjudicated under Germany's Act on Juvenile Courts.[44] A guiding principle of the juvenile justice system is *Erziehung*, meaning "education and care."[45] Under this principle, in-prison environments, treatments, and interventions are tailored to young adults' specific developmental needs.[46] This makes sense given that the brain continues to mature well into a person's mid-20s, according to neuroscience research. Young adults aged 18 to 24 are thus still developing in important ways, from forming identity to learning how to better manage emotions and impulses and establish life goals.[47] Their brains are highly malleable and open to influence during this period.[48] While this may help explain why young adults can be more susceptible to negative peer influence and poor decision-making, it also gives them tremendous capacity to make rapid positive change.[49]

In contrast, practices in the United States rarely differentiate between those who are 18 (or even younger in some states) and older adults.[50] Instead, the typical prison places obstacles in the way of achieving key milestones.[51] Rather than developing appropriate tools to learn from past mistakes, engage in meaningful accountability, and prepare for their future, young adults are often locked in cells all day with little or nothing to do. This doesn't help stem the cycle of crime and imprisonment or improve public safety. It can even reinforce the antisocial behavior that landed these youth behind bars in the first place.[52]

Restoring Promise's focus on younger adults also makes sense given their disproportionate rates of reincarceration in the United States.[53] Vera researchers piloted the program with young adults incarcerated in Connecticut in 2017, subsequently adding more jurisdictions with the support of private philanthropy.[54] Nine housing units now operate in Colorado, Connecticut, Idaho, Massachusetts, North Dakota, and South Carolina.

TABLE 1

Restoring Promise Sites

DATE ESTABLISHED	JURISDICTION	NAME OF UNIT/FACILITY*	POPULATION AS OF AUGUST 11, 2025
2017	Connecticut	Truthfulness, Respectfulness, Understanding, and Elevating (TRUE) Unit, Cheshire Correctional Institution	23 mentors, 71 young adults, 30 staff
2018	Middlesex County Sheriff's Office, Massachusetts	People Achieving Change Together (PACT) Unit, Middlesex County Jail and House of Correction	3 to 8 mentors, 20 to 30 young adults†
2018	Connecticut	Women Overcoming Recidivism Through Hard Work (WORTH) Unit, York Correctional Institution	5 mentors, 24 young adults, 19 staff
2018	South Carolina	Community Opportunity Restoration Enhancement (CORE) Unit, Turbeville Correctional Institution	3 mentors, 33 young adults, 2 staff
2019	South Carolina	Helping Other People Evolve (HOPE) Unit, Lee Correctional Institution	4 mentors, 33 young adults, 2 staff
2021	Colorado	Change Maker Village, Arkansas Valley Correctional Facility	12 mentors, 27 young adults, 10 staff
2022	North Dakota	Using Natural Integrity for Teaching Youth (UNITY) Village, North Dakota State Penitentiary	13 mentors, 49 young adults, 10 staff
2025	North Dakota	River's Empowerment, Determination, Gratitude, Excellence (EDGE), Missouri River Correctional Center	10 mentors, 8 young adults‡
2025	Idaho	Cornerstone Village, Idaho State Correctional Institution	9 mentors, 18 young adults, 2 staff

Source: Vera Institute of Justice.
* Facilities range from minimum to maximum security and include local jails. The WORTH unit at York Correctional Institution is the only current women's unit.
† Estimate based on data supplied prior to the end of formal collaboration with Vera in 2020.
‡ Because this is a minimum-security facility, there are no staff specifically assigned to the unit as there might be in a more tightly secured facility.

The Restoring Promise Approach

The Restoring Promise approach is an amalgam of established, evidence-based practices in the corrections field but embraces normalization and dynamic security as central principles.[55] It also incorporates complementary strategies already integrated into juvenile justice practices in the United States.[56] One is the Missouri Model's approach to supervision, which encourages constructive interaction between staff and the people they supervise to minimize fear, maximize trust, and foster respect.[57] For example, staff are encouraged to solicit and validate how participants may be feeling, as a way to help them channel their emotions into constructive, rather than destructive, actions. Other strategies include family engagement policies and practices and peer-to-peer support.[58]

The initiative also adopted a restorative justice framework for conflict resolution. Broadly defined, restorative justice is a set of methods for addressing harm and building relationships through dialogue, cooperation, and understanding.[59] These practices demonstrably encourage people to take responsibility and help repair harms they may have committed.[60] The framework can also enhance mutual respect and build stronger relationships while reducing the risk of future conflict.[61]

All interested young adults may apply to the Restoring Promise units, by writing a letter of interest.[62] Units also house peer mentors, incarcerated people serving long sentences who move to the unit to provide guidance to young participants. To be a mentor, incarcerated applicants must be more than 25 years old and have a letter of recommendation from staff.[63] Most sites use a lottery system to fill the limited space in the unit, but others, such as Connecticut's WORTH unit in the state's only women's prison, convene both staff and peer mentors to choose

participants.[64] The goal in either case is to have a mix of people in the unit that reflects the facility's general population as much as possible.[65] Each state places some restrictions on eligibility, usually based on whether a person has been convicted of a specified offense or category of offenses.[66] Other disqualification factors include sentences that require applicants to receive mandated treatment that may not be available at a facility with a Restoring Promise unit.[67]

The Units

Daily routines and unit attributes are designed to reflect life outside prison.[68] Criteria for each jurisdiction differ according to its unique needs, so units look different across the Restoring Promise sites. Most comprise two floors of individual or two-person rooms (e.g., South Carolina, North Dakota, and TRUE in Connecticut), while others, like Connecticut's WORTH unit, have open-plan barracks-style living (a preference of its initial residents). Although most residential rooms are not architecturally different from prison cells elsewhere in the facility, policies allow for more personalization (such as plants, pet fish, wall art, wall color, rugs, and even personal appliances) or more privacy (such as that provided by strategically placed low bookshelves that do not diminish an officer's line of sight into the room). In some units, residents have keys to their own cells, which helps instill a sense of pride and ownership.[69]

All Restoring Promise units feature a central communal space. Mentors and correctional staff design the physical layout and aesthetics of shared areas. This is because prison design influences the health and behavior of everyone in the facility, including staff and residents.[70] Exposure to natural light can help reduce depression and improve health, while soft materials reduce noise and foster calm.[71] Thus, for Restoring Promise, walls are painted in calming colors or covered in murals. Common spaces include places to cook, dine, wash clothes, exercise, and engage in recreational activities; some units have outdoor spaces. Lounges have soft furniture, card tables, and televisions. Cooking facilities range from fully equipped kitchens — as in North Dakota's unit — to access to personal or shared equipment such as refrigerators, freezers, microwaves, coffee machines, and air fryers. Dining areas are designed to encourage family-style meals, allowing residents to experience a more normalized environment where they can interact with one another and build positive relationships.

Extra cells are also refurbished and converted into spaces for community use, which may include a library, a computer room, a barbershop, or a private area for therapeutic sessions, school, and life-skills programs. Many units have dedicated quiet spaces for meditation, religious activity, conflict resolution, or study. North Dakota's Unity Village has a mentor lounge with a coffee machine, couch, and television for decompression and bonding time. It also has a study lounge, which is always open and has books, a television, and a game console. Unity Village even has a podcast room. The podcast produced there, *Chainz2Changed*, is released on alternate Mondays on Spotify, iHeartRadio, and Audible.

Daily Life and Activities

Think of the archetypal American prison experience of enforced idleness or punishing labor, under all-encompassing state control with few options for rehabilitative, vocational, or postsecondary programming.[72] In this world, arbitrary prison policies dictate everything: rote rules about what people wear; when they wake up, eat, and shower; and what, if anything, they do during the day — which has little to do with the individual or their path to rehabilitation.[73]

In contrast, life in a Restoring Promise unit is guided by a meaningful daily schedule designed to maximize a sense of purpose. Days mirror the routines and pace of a productive life in the community as closely as possible, including set times when residents wake, eat, "commute" to classes or work, engage in recreational activities and exercise, and participate in community activities.[74] Participants wear clothes that look more like a school or work uniform than a prison jumpsuit and spend much of the day outside of their cells. Depending on the jurisdiction or their job outside the unit, this could mean up to 15 hours of out-of-cell time per day.[75] (By comparison, in some facilities incarcerated people spend up to 22 hours inside their cell even if they are not in explicitly restrictive housing.)[76] Off-unit work includes kitchen, commissary, and hospice positions. If residents don't have external jobs or studies, they are responsible for in-unit jobs and chores, usually negotiated among unit residents and mentors. Young adults, mentors, staff, and outside volunteers collaboratively design activities such as workshops, which may cover personal finances, business planning, conflict resolution, and parenting, among other topics. Units often have unlimited slots for participation in such programs.[77] Twice a day, residents, staff, and mentors have check-ins together to celebrate accomplishments, monitor mental and emotional well-being, or intervene if a crisis or dispute arises.

The units use restorative circles — formal meetings among unit residents and staff — to raise concerns about behavior and determine responses if a community agreement has been broken. Elsewhere in the prison, responses to rule-breaking are often harsh, ranging from solitary confinement to loss of family phone calls or visits. But in Restoring Promise, restorative justice principles guide the response. Here, sanctions could include a "corrective action plan" developed in collaboration with the involved parties as well as staff and mentors. The plan could involve a community service project, restitution, a public apology, extra chores, or another action aimed at taking responsibility and repairing harm.[78] (Major violations of facility policy still go through a traditional disciplinary process.)

Some units have created their own accountability mechanisms outside of restorative circles. TRUE established a unique "currency" system to help regulate behavior and reinforce positive conduct while teaching money management skills. The system gives out loans that must be paid back, and residents receive wages and bonuses for work, using them to pay rent and cover other costs such as child support, utilities, food, and health insurance. Residents can also be assessed late fees, penalties, extra expenses, or fines for violations of unit norms, such as negative communication, disruptive behavior, and even tardiness to key group events.[79] This helps residents learn how to manage similar expectations in their communities after release, with the benefit of an active support system helping them learn how to navigate the anxiety and stressors of these expectations.

High-Quality Relationships

Research has confirmed that in daily prison life, what matters most to incarcerated people are respect, humanity, fairness, order, safety, and high-quality relationships.[80] Thus, a core element of reorienting the culture and environment in Restoring Promise units is human connection. This begins and ends with positive relationships among corrections staff, residents of the unit and prison, and family, friends, and others on the outside. Such relationships are important preconditions for human flourishing and a protective factor that reduces the likelihood of antisocial behaviors.[81]

In Restoring Promise units, the value of good relationships shows up in three spheres:

- **Staff–resident relationships.** Staff are encouraged to get to know residents on a human level and work in conjunction with mentors to help create a supportive environment built on trust. They receive specialized training in listening and coaching skills, empathy, de-escalation tactics, conflict resolution, and motivational interviewing, a collaborative style of communication that helps people explore their motivation for (or ambivalence toward) positive change.[82] The resulting sense of familiarity and respect allows staff to identify early warning signs of trouble and opens up space for residents to act as allies to achieve order and cohesion. This is in stark contrast to anti-fraternization policies that usually prohibit these types of interactions in U.S. prisons.[83] Once staff are no longer inhabiting the traditional "enforce and punish" role of corrections officers, but rather roles more similar to youth counselors or coaches, they can explore healthier interactions and better equip young adults with practical, social, and emotional skills. According to Dave Krabbenhoft, former director of the North Dakota Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (DOCR), this has been an important and positive shift for all involved. Staff transitioned from a stressful ethos of command and control to an opportunity to be a positive influence in other people's lives and build community. Krabbenhoft says dynamic security has become a "core correctional practice" in the state and is part of standard training modules.[84]

- **Relationships among residents.** Peer mentors serve a central role in the operation and organization of life in the unit. They are role models for the other young adults, serving as a sounding board or providing support, especially if residents are struggling with each other or with staff. They also generate ideas for trainings, presentations, workshops, and healing circles. In terms of creative solutions for correctional culture, Krabbenhoft endorses "looking at residents as a resource [and] . . . part of the solution."[85]

- **Family and friend relationships.** Although research demonstrates that maintaining contact with supportive family members reduces recidivism, improves behavior, and promotes emotional well-being, many state corrections departments have strict policies that allow visitation only on select days and for short durations.[86] Physical contact is often denied, even between parents and children. Invasive preapproval and security procedures, such as body cavity searches for contraband, and lengthy travel times to rural prison sites also pose significant barriers.[87] For these reasons and others, a 2015 analysis found that less than one-third of people in state prisons received a visit from a loved one in a typical month.[88]

  In contrast, enhanced family engagement strategies such as in-person visits, video visits, phone calls, mail exchange, and event participation are important components of the Restoring Promise approach. Family visits for people who live on the unit are longer and much more intimate than what standard visitation policies usually allow. Visitors and young adults sit next to each other and can have physical contact. Residents can share with their families the certificates they have earned, schoolwork, artwork, and other items that show their achievements. These visits improve communication and deepen trust. In addition to individual visits, the units hold family engagement events throughout the year. These include family days, family orientations, Father's Day celebrations, anniversaries, graduations, talent shows, and participation in restorative circles, all of which allow meaningful interaction and recreational enjoyment that is experienced in a more "normal" way.[89]

Preliminary Outcomes

From 2019 to 2021, Vera researchers conducted multiple surveys examining the culture and social environment in Restoring Promise units in South Carolina at the Turbeville

Correctional Institution and Lee Correctional Institution. They also conducted a study that included a randomized control trial — considered the gold standard for evaluating the effectiveness of an intervention — to evaluate the effects of Restoring Promise's approach on violence and misconduct in prison.[90] An additional aim of the study was to determine if findings could be generalized to all young adults held in South Carolina prisons.

It found that young adults from the two Restoring Promise units demonstrated a 73 percent reduction in the odds of being written up for violence, compared with a control group in the general population. Moreover, there was an 83 percent reduction in restrictive housing stays during the first year of participation in the Restoring Promise units.[91] These findings accounted for a range of factors, such as custody level, education level, pre-treatment outcomes, length of time in the study, race, and age. Importantly, the study also found no significant difference in violence levels between young adults who had applied to the program but did not get a spot and those who had not applied. This suggests that the differences in outcomes observed among Restoring Promise participants are due to actual participation in the program and not to the inherent characteristics of those who chose to apply. Therefore, it is likely that broader program benefits would accrue to other parts of the state's prisons if the program were replicated and scaled within the system.[92]

Vera researchers also examined how Restoring Promise was implemented and experienced across different correctional contexts and populations.[93] The analysis found strong consistency in daily routine, the mentorship model, restorative justice practices, and family engagement, with some divergence in how mentors were chosen and the degree and scale of family engagement activities. When surveyed on culture change outcomes, both young adult residents and correctional staff reported positive experiences across four specified domains: purpose (their sense that their daily life was meaningful), fairness, safety, and family engagement. A cross-site analysis of prison culture surveys administered at the end of a separate process evaluation (12 to 18 months after opening) in all seven units in operation in December 2024 reaffirmed these beneficial effects.[94] Among other things, young adults reported that

- they felt safe (94.6 percent);
- they believed their overall time on the unit was productive (92.5 percent), they were getting the support they needed (88 percent), and they were gaining life skills (88.9 percent);
- officers treated them with respect (68 percent) and were positive role models (71 percent); and
- they were able to have high-quality visits (83.7 percent).

Staff reported that

- they enjoyed working with residents (100 percent);
- they thought that all young adults in the unit had the potential to successfully transition to life outside prison (88 percent) and that time in the program was preparing them to achieve this goal (95.5 percent);
- they liked their job (80.5 percent), enjoyed working on the unit (78 percent), and felt safe (97 percent); and
- they believed they were part of a community on the unit (97.7 percent).

Looking to the Future

Vera and its partner states have been working to replicate and scale the Restoring Promise approach since the establishment of the first unit. While Vera cannot provide technical support to every interested department of corrections (DOC), it published a *Restoring Promise Implementation Toolkit* in January 2024 to guide administrators through a step-by-step process from planning to training to launching and sustaining their own units.[95] Massachusetts — previously part of the initiative — and Connecticut have also opened additional young adult units inspired by the Restoring Promise approach.[96] Connecticut's reentry-focused unit opened in 2021 across the hall from the original TRUE unit, and the Massachusetts DOC created two parenting-focused young adult units, one for men in 2021 and one for women in 2024.[97]

In February 2025, North Dakota opened a new Restoring Promise unit at Missouri River Correctional Center with the assistance of Vera and is planning another unit at a new 260-bed women's facility in the town of Mandan, due to open in 2027.[98] Former correctional director Krabbenhoft said the architecture firm DLR Group is designing the facility with normalization and a behavioral health model in mind.[99] The state DOC hopes to require a four-year degree for all staff, who will be called "residential treatment agents." The plan is to build a continuous-care model for people who have been released, also mirroring practices in northern Europe. South Carolina has also indicated interest in establishing a Restoring Promise unit in a women's facility.[100]

Finally, Vera is launching Designed for Dignity, which is meant to sustainably extend the reach of the Restoring Promise approach from isolated units for young adults to greater correctional systems.[101] In participating states, the organization will collaborate with a work group comprising correctional leadership, staff, and people who are incarcerated, and will undertake a comprehensive review of resources to help ensure long-term sustainability.

The Scandinavian Prison Project

Another unit-based initiative that aims to test international approaches to incarceration is the Scandinavian Prison Project (SPP).[102] In 2018, researchers from Drexel University and the University of Oslo entered into an agreement with the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections (PADOC), then headed by Secretary John Wetzel, to create an experimental housing unit at State Correctional Institution (SCI) Chester, a medium-security, reentry-focused facility near Philadelphia.[103] The resulting project, the SPP, is a multiyear partnership with the Norwegian Correctional Service and the Swedish Prison and Probation Service. The project is piloting correctional practices from both countries while researchers monitor implementation and outcomes.[104]

That Pennsylvania was fertile ground for this type of project is unsurprising. Secretary Wetzel, along with Steve Chanenson — one of the SPP core team members and former chair of the Pennsylvania Commission on Sentencing — participated in a 2013 trip to German and Dutch prisons that the Vera Institute of Justice and the Prison Law Office organized.[105] The trip sparked several reform efforts within PADOC.[106] They included the rollout of transitional units in each facility for people nearing release and a restructuring of officer training.[107] PADOC also began to study how to effectively and safely reduce its use of solitary confinement.[108]

The SPP takes these efforts a step further by testing dynamic security and normalization in a U.S. prison environment.[109] Data collection was ongoing as of the writing of this report. Once the data collection period concludes, researchers will assess how the changed policies and practices have affected recidivism, misconduct, and staff well-being.[110] They will also study perceptions of safety, trust, and motivation among staff and residents.[111] The hope is that the analysis will provide useful information to others who seek to implement dynamic security, normalization, and similar approaches in U.S. prisons more broadly.

The SPP Model

From 2018 to 2020, the SPP's first phase focused on an international exchange of ideas to see which policies and practices could be applied in Pennsylvania.[112] This included a 2019 trip to Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, where frontline operational staff from PADOC and some state policymakers learned firsthand about these countries' correctional systems.[113]

PADOC staff not only toured facilities and spoke with officials but, for two of the trip's three weeks, worked alongside their Norwegian counterparts in one of three mentoring prisons.[114] This gave them the opportunity to watch Norwegian correctional officers speak and interact with prison residents and respond to challenging situations in a humane and empathetic way. The Pennsylvania delegation then began to reconceptualize their own roles at home, reflecting on how Scandinavian practices could be adapted to SCI Chester.[115] Through a ground-up approach, these staff members played a fundamental role in developing the proposed unit. The program's goal was not to create a prescriptive and detailed model but rather to allow the staff themselves to develop the key parameters, within the relevant regulations, for the unit.

Physical renovations at SCI Chester started in the fall of 2019. In March 2020, six men serving life sentences, chosen by lottery, moved into the new unit. Prior to the unit's official launch, they worked with staff to develop and finalize policies and procedures by testing out how they would work on-site and in practice.[116] Similar to the Restoring Promise model, these men would act as mentors, helping unit residents acquire the social, emotional, and practical skills to better navigate life inside the unit and inspiring them to work toward gaining skills that would be useful in society after they are released.[117] They would also act as a bridge between residents and staff, helping to mediate conflicts.[118] Though the project paused because of the Covid-19 pandemic, the full operational team traveled to Sweden again in the spring of 2022 to finalize the policies and structural layout of the unit.[119]

Little Scandinavia

The new unit, dubbed "Little Scandinavia," opened in May 2022. It can house up to 64 men.[120] Structural changes designed to provide a sense of normalcy were made to the unit layout and the individual cells. A communal space has couches, exercise equipment, plants, a fish tank, and a game table. Residents have access to outdoor green spaces, a washer and dryer, and — in a rare move for U.S. prisons — a fully equipped shared kitchen.[121]

Working with their contact officer, described below, residents can purchase groceries online from a local grocery store, which delivers to the prison.

Cells are single occupancy and resemble college dorm rooms. They include custom-made furniture, a mini fridge, and a television. Other design choices minimize the institutional character and harshness of prison, including warm and inviting color schemes, sound-dampening ceilings, and sound- and heat-insulating treatment for the concrete floors.[122]

Besides access to communal indoor and outdoor spaces and group activities, residents have tablets with music, games, and access to email. They are allowed to use laundry machines on the unit, and they earn a higher wage for work than residents of other housing units in

the same facility do.[123] Some even have pets through a shelter foster program.[124] Collectively, these changes aim to instill a sense of agency and autonomy despite incarceration, helping to foster a bridge between life in prison and the outside world.

Working Conditions in Need of Reform

>> Corrections is an often overlooked and misunderstood profession, where, in the words of social psychologist Hans Toch, "officers are imprisoned by ignorance of who they are and what they do."[125] But corrections staff are a vital component of the U.S. system of public safety and should be centered in prison reform efforts.

For decades, state prisons have struggled to recruit and retain full-time staff. The problem was exacerbated by the Covid-19 crisis.[126] State prisons lost 11 percent of their full-time workforce from 2020 to 2023.[127] The Federal Bureau of Prisons, the nation's largest prison system, had a 21 percent vacancy rate for correctional officers, or 4,293 positions unfilled, at the end of September 2022. Some states grapple with even higher vacancy rates: In North Carolina, about 39 percent of correctional officer positions were unfilled in February 2024.[128] The New Hampshire Department of Corrections reported a 48 percent vacancy rate for entry-level correctional officer roles.[129] The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts a 7 percent decline in employment by 2034.[130]

Understaffing erodes a corrections department's ability to fulfill even the most basic of its responsibilities and threatens the ability of prisons to provide rehabilitative programming to incarcerated individuals. Some states have become reliant on locking incarcerated people inside their cells for most of the day to offset the reduction in supervisory staff. In 2023, some 1,000 people incarcerated at the Waupun Correctional Institution in Wisconsin were confined almost exclusively to their cells for more than four months — unable to participate in programming, spend time outside, receive timely medical care, call their families, or even see another human being — because of staff shortages.[131] Understaffing is also costly. From 2019 to 2024, an analysis of 26 states with complete data found that departments of corrections spent $2.2 billion on overtime alone.[132]

When departments do find officers, they don't stay on the job. According to surveys administered in 2020 and 2021 by the Correctional Leaders Association, an organization dedicated to supporting and advancing the corrections profession, almost half of administrators from across all 50 state departments of correction reported officer turnover rates in the 20 to 30 percent range annually. Among existing staff, 38 percent leave within a year and 48 percent leave within one to five years.[133] In 2023, Texas had a 30.9 percent turnover rate for correctional officer positions, and the rate for juvenile correctional officers was an immense 71.8 percent.[134] According to the Texas Department of Criminal Justice in 2025, 63 percent of officers had been with the department for three years or less.[135] In explaining their reasons for leaving, former correctional employees cite onerous hours caused by understaffing, low job satisfaction, and burnout.[136] Low pay is also an issue. The mean hourly wage for correctional officers and jailers is just over $28 per hour, according to data from 2023. For salaried staff in that same year, 12 states paid $46,000 or less in annual compensation for these roles; nearly half of states pay less than $52,000 annually.[137] For comparison, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's living wage calculator estimates that the amount needed for a family of four to live without precarity in the state with the lowest cost of living is about $75,000 annually.[138]

This chronic underinvestment in prison staff has been devastating for people who work in prisons, and its effects extend beyond the obvious. A 2013 study found that corrections workers suffered from PTSD and depression at levels significantly higher than the national average.[139] It can even take a deadly toll. A 2017 study showed correctional officers' suicide rate to be 39 percent higher than that for people in all other professions combined.[140]

Within the context of a shrinking and demoralized workforce, some states are reimagining correctional environments to better support staff. Advocates including Amend, One Voice, Chicago Beyond, and the Institute for Municipal and Regional Policy are looking for solutions that go beyond just higher salaries.[141]

Many of the programs in this report have shown how enhancing the prison environment, widening avenues to rehabilitation, and training staff to engage in constructive and meaningful relationships with residents can reduce the enduring stressors that drive people out of the corrections profession. Reducing workplace violence and easing the constant state of heightened vigilance are critical to improving mental and physical health for staff, and better health for staff is intimately connected to better treatment of incarcerated people. Pairing investments in resources for incarcerated people with similar initiatives for employee wellness can build much-needed staff buy-in for reforms that benefit everyone.

Like Restoring Promise, Little Scandinavia also has its own conflict resolution and disciplinary mechanisms. The unit created a novel internal governance structure, and a network of mentors helps keep the unit running smoothly and aids in conflict resolution. When conflicts occur, residents and officers sit together and talk things out, using restorative justice principles rather than defaulting to punishment, although the disciplinary system used in the wider facility still handles any major violation of prison policy, such as violence or possession of contraband.

A New Framework for Corrections Staff

Two of the biggest innovations in Little Scandinavia were an increase in the officer-to-resident ratio, which is associated with improved relationships, services, safety, and health; and a revision to PADOC's anti-fraternization policy, which generally prohibits staff from engaging with residents on a personal level.[142] Instead, a key component of dynamic security both in Norway and now in Little Scandinavia is the concept of *contact officers* — frontline correctional staff assigned to residents and responsible for helping them navigate their time in prison as well as prepare for their release.[143] This means staff must know residents well enough to help them deal with personal and interpersonal problems, manage stress, or get advice on things such as work, education, finances, and employment. Contact officers also act as informal connectors to services, programs, and other resources that facilitate access to information inside and outside the prison. In the new unit, officers and residents cook, eat meals, and play games together, getting to know one another personally.

The new staff curriculum includes courses in crisis management, negotiation and communication, suicide prevention, and motivational interviewing.[144] It also includes training in *yield theory*, a communications tool that centers meeting others where they are emotionally to help get beyond their fight-or-flight response. The goal is to hear and validate people, letting them speak first (yielding the conversational right-of-way) if necessary, so that they can communicate past the intensity of their emotions.[145] According to SCI Chester Superintendent Gina Clark, who oversees the unit, officers act as "a hybrid of a corrections officer and corrections counselor." She noted, "When you talk to the men who live there, their attitudes have already changed. There's more time to sit with your thoughts. They're more focused and not worried about sharing a small space."[146]

Because the unit's supervision style focuses less on surveillance and control and more on shared goals for safety and development, both staff and residents can work on deepening their communication skills. When routine interactions are framed as opportunities for growth, everyone working and living on the unit has the chance to become an active participant in the community.

Preliminary Outcomes

A key component of the SPP is a rigorous evaluation of the effects of the piloted policies and practices on both staff and residents. Little Scandinavia residents are chosen through a lottery system, and most of the approximately 1,100 men housed in SCI Chester are eligible, which ensures that the unit reflects the facility's general population.[147] (For example, about 10 percent of people in the prison are serving life sentences, so 6 of the 64 residents on the unit are as well.) This approach to resident selection allows researchers to test the unit's general effectiveness through a randomized control trial. This project, which also includes survey research, is one of only a few such tests of European prison principles and practices in the United States, assessing changes in recidivism, misconduct, officer well-being, and residents' perceptions of safety, trust, and motivation.[148]

Data collection for the randomized control trial is ongoing (scheduled to end in 2026), so it is too early to report outcomes definitively, but the unit's approach has already shown positive results. One of the principal investigators, Drexel professor Jordan Hyatt, noted, "People on the unit report higher levels of satisfaction with the community, especially regarding the relationships between the people who live and work there."[149] A recently conducted prison climate survey confirmed this observation, finding that Little Scandinavia has fewer disputes than others at SCI Chester, less misconduct, and decreased use of restrictive housing as a form of discipline. There's also almost no violence. By comparison, facilities statewide experienced a 21.6 percent leap in violence in 2024, to the highest level in 30 years.[150]

Looking to the Future

State lawmakers have been vocal in their support for making Little Scandinavia a permanent fixture at SCI Chester, highlighting its focus on rehabilitation, improved outcomes for incarcerated individuals, and better quality of life for correctional officers.[151] At a Pennsylvania House Appropriations Committee meeting in March 2025, PADOC Secretary Laurel Harry announced the expansion of Little Scandinavia to three additional state facilities.[152] This expansion is largely supported by grant funding, primarily from Arnold Ventures, supplementing PADOC's own investments in physical reconfigurations (SCI Chester's extensive makeover cost about $300,000).[153] Many advocates for prison reform, including those from Families Against Mandatory Minimums and the Pennsylvania Prison Society, have also expressed strong support, describing the model as a crucial step toward a more humane and effective correctional system in the state.[154]

II. Amend at UCSF

Amend, a physician-led nonprofit organization based at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF), School of Medicine, takes a public health approach to addressing the harms of imprisonment in the United States. It does this through international exchange, officer training, and technical assistance interventions that are derived from practices used in northern Europe.

One reporter described the initiative as "a combination of an academic think tank and a boots-on-the-ground service provider with the long-range mission of 'changing correctional culture' and immediate mission of making prisons less debilitating to the physical and mental health of those who live and work in them."[155] Amend currently works in California, Connecticut, North Dakota, Oregon, and Washington State and has led targeted programming efforts in Alaska, Hawaii, Idaho, Missouri, New York State, and Rhode Island.

Amend's work is anchored in cultural exchange with the Norwegian Correctional Service and a growing network of U.S. prisons where Amend's approach is already being implemented. The nonprofit was founded by Brie Williams, a physician trained in internal medicine, geriatrics, and palliative care, in collaboration with Cyrus Ahalt, whose background is in public health, public policy, and criminal justice reform and who has expertise in program design and evaluation. After working as a medical expert in prison litigation cases — including the well-documented case of the Angola Three, incarcerated Black Panthers who endured decades of solitary confinement — Williams concluded that health-care professions have an obligation and an opportunity to help change conditions "immediately and profoundly" to reduce harm and can do so in collaboration with prison leadership and staff.[156]

In 2015, Amend launched an international immersion program to expose U.S. correctional leaders and government officials to Norwegian practices, with the goal of introducing them to a public health model whose philosophy could be incorporated into some U.S. prisons. From 2018 to 2020, it focused its work on four states: California, North Dakota, Oregon, and Washington.[157] Realizing that such an ambitious goal would require buy-in at all levels, Amend brought its first cohort of uniformed staff and prison leaders from Oregon to Norway in 2018.

A Public Health Approach to Change-Making

It was always clear that Amend's approach in the United States would have to look different from reform in Norway, where people "go to court to get punished and go to prison to become better neighbors."[158] Norway's adjustment came in the 1990s after a government commission studied the roots of pervasive prison violence and poor post-release outcomes.[159] A directive from the ministers of education, health, and justice, as well as other leaders, acknowledged that the country's correctional system was doing more harm than good. Recidivism was increasing, the health of

incarcerated people was getting worse, and violence in prisons was on the rise.[160] As a result, Norway radically reconceptualized its prison system to reduce recidivism rates and increase the well-being of incarcerated people.

While the United States has yet to experience such a revolution in how it conceptualizes prison, the country had a parallel experience in the late 20th century in the health-care field. This "patient safety movement," born out of an abundance of poor health outcomes and medical errors, empowered patients and health-care professionals to engage in more holistic care that centered patients and uplifted staff to practice at the height of their professional capacities.[161] With her background in health, Williams considers U.S. prisons a "public health catastrophe" and believes a similar public health–focused national movement is required to immediately reduce harm and improve outcomes for all who live and work in them.[162]

Amend often starts its work with states in the most "hidden, unhealthy, and desperate places in a prison — solitary confinement units."[163] The organization works with staff to help people held in isolation, with the use of more meaningful, person-centered public health approaches to identify and meet their needs and to support them in behavior change. This requires staff to think differently, work differently, and model positive behavior, activities that benefit them as well as the people in their custody. Williams says Amend's goal is to "meet these places of extreme deprivation with meaningful human interactions and activities . . . that reduce the extreme stress and violence that is occurring for incarcerated people and staff."[164]

International Correctional Exchange

Amend takes an approach that is both top-down (enlisting government and correctional leaders) and ground-up (involving corrections staff). To help promote culture change within corrections, Amend brings correctional leaders and government officials to prisons in Norway. Line staff also benefit from visiting Norway, where they shadow Norwegian correctional officers, attend Amend-led training programs at Norway's correctional officer training academy, and learn more about innovative correctional practices. Other nations where Amend is expanding its use of immersion programming include Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Sweden. The Amend Ambassador Program furthers its mission by enlisting experienced U.S. corrections staff to train their counterparts in states whose prisons are embarking on this type of change with Amend. A core aspect of the immersion program is working with policymakers and correctional leaders to identify the voices that are missing in the discussion of policy reforms, including people who are incarcerated, community-based organizations, and state leaders.

Amend's Approaches to Reform

>> Amend's approach is informed by policies such as normalization and dynamic security. However, it also uses two other organizing principles:

- **Progression.** As people behind bars engage in rehabilitative programming, they earn staff members' trust and progress to more privileges, which may include reassignment to a lower-security environment (eventually including "time off" from prison each month to spend in the community) and new responsibilities, such as employment, cooking for themselves, education in classes outside prisons, and mentorship. Accumulated over time, these changes give them more resilience to adjust to liberty when they leave.

- **Transparency.** As prisons implement reforms, it is important to ensure that up-to-date correctional policies, practices, and data, including outcomes related to safety, health, human rights, rehabilitation, and demographic disparities, are publicly available and readily accessible. Transparency ideally should also include a commitment to provide access to facilities, staff, and incarcerated people who wish to speak with elected officials, oversight bodies, independent experts, and other stakeholders.

Amend has also adapted versions of Norway's contact officer and resource team models for its U.S. partner prisons.

- **Contact officers.** A contact officer is assigned to support a small cohort of people while they are incarcerated, connecting them with resources and opportunities to make the transition back to their communities more successful.

- **Resource and activity teams.** A resource team is based in a restrictive housing unit, while an activity team is mobile, typically working throughout a prison. Both teams empower staff to work safely and effectively with people who need the most support to remain on track and out of restrictive housing.

These cultural exchange programs incorporate best practices from Norwegian and international correctional officer training as well as public health education. Importantly, the workforces in both nations benefit. A correctional officer from Norway described ways that they learn from the United States. For example, personal tablets are

readily available to residents in many prisons in the United States but are rarely used in Norway.[165] These devices provide education and entertainment and facilitate communication with loved ones. As a result of a partnership with Amend, incarcerated individuals and officers at Bredtveit Prison in Norway proposed launching a pilot program to introduce tablets at Bredtveit.[166] Meanwhile, an officer at Oregon's Snake River Correctional Institution described being inspired to launch a resource team with Amend after his shadowing experience in Norway. His efforts have since led to moving people out of long-term solitary confinement and into the prison's general population, including multiple men who had been held in solitary for more than a decade.[167]

Reenvisioning the Role of Correctional Staff

While Amend can't solve the endemic staffing shortages confronting the systems it works with, it recognizes that making the job safer and more meaningful will improve staff recruitment and retention.

Amend helps correctional officers reenvision their role as that of public health workers trained and empowered to support incarcerated people and their rehabilitation, fostering a humane and dignified environment and reducing trauma and harm in facilities. This requires a substantial change in not just the job but the indicators of success. Williams conveyed an officer's experience: "I used to think success at my work was when nothing bad happens and . . . I was showing people who's in charge," this officer said. "And now I realize that success at work is when somebody looks at me and says, 'Thank you for helping me get into a program. Thank you for helping me reengage with my child. Thank you for helping me plan for my parole board meeting.'"[168]

Norway makes significant investments in correctional staff by giving all officers at least two years of paid training, split between the Norwegian Correctional Academy and practical training in prisons. Students study law, psychology, ethics, and criminology along with de-escalation techniques. People who want more training can earn a bachelor's degree in correctional studies. In contrast, some corrections departments in the United States provide as little as six weeks of training. Amend aims to make up at least some of the difference.

Amend trainers work with staff, provide feedback on their interactions with incarcerated people, and guide them on more effective ways to encourage change. Staff develop relationships and often stay in touch after training ends, sharing experiences and providing support. Through the program's Ambassadors Initiative, some staff who have received Amend training travel to other prisons to become Amend trainers in turn. Amend provides technical assistance to help staff and leaders better understand the connection between occupational health and the health and well-being of incarcerated people — and how reforms enhance wellness and reduce violence.

Amend works to help staff see that their most important partners are often the people who are incarcerated. This can mean turning to people who have experienced solitary confinement to act as peer mentors.

Resource and activity teams work with the highest-risk, highest-needs people, providing them with extra support to remain on track. By focusing on just a few people, these teams can decrease violent behavior in restrictive housing (isolation) units, decrease staff use of force, and improve health, wellness, and job satisfaction for staff. Ultimately, the goal is to improve public safety after people return to their communities by reducing the trauma they experience in prison and the behaviors that trauma causes. Teams are led by specially trained correctional officers and often include peer mentors, behavioral health specialists, healthcare professionals, and security staff. Team members work to bring people out of their isolation — not in shackles or restraints or in a confrontational manner, but by engaging them in meaningful activities. The goal is to help them transition from solitary confinement to a more normal living environment within the facility as soon as possible.

A Tale of Two States

When Amend works in a state, it looks to ensure that the state's DOC takes ownership of any changes, which means implementation may look different across participating departments. Below are examples of how Amend has worked with states to reduce violence in prisons, improve conditions for both staff and those who are incarcerated, and ultimately produce safer communities.

North Dakota

Like the rest of the country, North Dakota experienced an explosion in its prison population from 1980 to 2010, creating overcrowded and unsafe conditions.[169] A 2012 expansion at North Dakota State Penitentiary (NDSP) almost doubled the number of cells for long-term solitary confinement.[170] Over the next year, the median length of stay in solitary increased from 109 days to 136.5 days.[171] Former Correctional Director Leann Bertsch implemented some key reforms, including training in motivational interviewing and positive behavior reports, but by 2015 prisons were so full that North Dakota was considering sending incarcerated people to other states.[172]

That year, Amend began a formal partnership with the North Dakota DOCR to reduce the use of solitary confinement and improve conditions for the people who remained there. Although Scandinavian countries also

use isolation, Norway "employs solitary confinement far less frequently, and for a much shorter duration, than is the norm across U.S. prisons," noted Colby Braun, who was warden of NDSP before becoming the agency's director in 2024.[173] In October 2015, Bertsch joined a North Dakota delegation that traveled to Norway to participate in Amend's immersive training program. Inspired by the trip, a month later the DOCR leadership team launched "Increasing Humanity for People in Prison," an undertaking that included 100 staff members, currently and formerly incarcerated people, and some of the family members of those still serving time.[174]

Braun recalled that when Bertsch returned from Norway, the two were determined to reduce the population in their restrictive housing unit, "the deepest trenches of the facility.[175] They also started using positive behavior reports in restrictive housing as part of the effort to transform those units.

The correctional officer role was reimagined to focus on building trust and positive relationships.[176] When Bertsch hired Penny Veit-Hetletved as director of education for the DOCR, they quickly determined that correctional officers were poorly prepared; their training curriculum was only three weeks long. Bertsch rewrote it with her leadership team to incorporate Norway's principles of dynamic security, normalization, and progression and to encourage corrections offers to focus on building trust and positive relationships.[177] Amend staff and Norwegian correctional officers also came to North Dakota to conduct in-person trainings and to share ideas about how to improve officer training in the state.

Starting a Resource Team at Washington State Penitentiary

>> Brennan Center staff attended a three-day training in June 2023 as part of Amend's launch for the resource team at Washington State Penitentiary in Walla Walla. The five correctional officers on that team were preparing to work with the restrictive housing population. Resource teams from California, Oregon, and another prison in Washington, as well as three Norwegian corrections officials, joined Amend training staff to mentor the new team and shore up support from leaders.

The group discussed how resource teams can improve outcomes for high-risk individuals by reducing staff assaults and incidents of self-harm by residents, shrinking the number of people in isolation, and ameliorating the damage of long-term isolation. Resource teams can also bring greater humanity to prisons by bridging the gap between incarcerated people and staff, fostering positive changes in residents' lives, and improving staff wellness. Taken together, these interventions have the potential to measurably benefit community safety when people leave the facility.

A correctional officer who helped to establish a resource team in California suggested that the new team should "own it. Don't make it about Amend or Norway. Make it about culture change." Corrections staff on the training teams said that while in the past they would have locked someone in a cell for dysregulated behavior, they now saw their task as engaging those people and bringing them *out* of the cell. This approach is rooted in the goal of identifying and alleviating behavioral problems, even for an individual who could be seen as "undeserving" of positive attention.

Within the first day of training, penitentiary staff in Washington had identified 16 incarcerated people in isolation who were good candidates for attention from the resource team. They decided to focus on those with release dates in the next six months. Officers characterized this as an opportunity to give people more than "$40 and a bus ticket" on release.

But they didn't focus solely on these candidates. Michael, for example, was serving a sentence of life without parole and had been in and out of solitary confinement since 2008.[178] After speaking with Michael and reading his file, the team decided to give him an opportunity to engage in an activity that would be meaningful to him: playing guitar. For about an hour in a program room, Michael and a team officer played the guitar together. One officer on the team reported that "a smile came over his face when he played. He almost seemed to forget he was in a prison." One of the officers from Oregon said, "If that doesn't scream 'staff wellness,' I don't know what does. I imagine the staff working that tier [will] have a better night with him."

During the training, staff from Amend, Norway, and other U.S. prisons ran through logistics and role-played how the Washington resource team would implement its first exercise. This included becoming familiar with residents' challenges, identifying triggers and provocations, choosing staff with patience and strong communication skills, ensuring that officers are methodical and know where entrances and exits are, and reminding officers engaging in these activities to acknowledge the humanity of incarcerated people by shaking hands and saying hello when visiting their cells.

The DOCR also adopted the Norwegian "import model" for reentry, in which in-prison services are delivered through local and municipal service providers from the community, providing a better continuity of services.[179] Incarcerated people now attend a pre-release resource fair to connect with community service providers and potential employers. Staff from the Department of Health and Human Services visit prisons and sign people up for SNAP benefits, Medicaid, and other post-release services. In February 2025, Braun also invited the state house and senate appropriations committees to hold hearings inside a prison, where incarcerated people and staff gave presentations. Braun said that having legislators inside the prison was critical to ensure that they understood what it meant to approve certain budget items, including a new, nontraditional women's facility.[180] It also helped elected officials meet people who were incarcerated.

The policy changes DOCR made led to a reduction of more than 74 percent in the use of solitary confinement. Placements in any form of restrictive housing also decreased significantly for people with serious mental illness.[181]

Oregon

In 2015, the nonprofit Disability Rights Oregon published a report finding significant human rights violations against people in the behavioral health unit (BHU) at the Oregon State Penitentiary in Salem.[182] The BHU is a separate unit on prison grounds designed to house people who are the most vulnerable and most disruptive in custody. Disability Rights Oregon found that most people in the BHU were allowed out of their cells no more than one hour a day. They lacked access to mental health services and had been met with violence and retaliation by correctional staff.[183] After the report was published, the Oregon DOC signed an agreement with Disability Rights Oregon requiring the DOC to increase out-of-cell time, provide more confidential therapeutic treatment, and reduce uses of force by officers.[184] The prison system would go on to improve some practices, but time out of cell still remained below the goal of 20 hours a week, and other concerns still needed attention.

In 2017, Oregon DOC officials participated in Amend's "public health–focused prison culture transformation program" in Norway.[185] Former Oregon DOC Director Colette Peters then worked with the leadership team to develop the Oregon Way, a plan to focus on humanizing and normalizing life in the state's prison system. Changes included opening a Japanese garden at the state penitentiary as a space where incarcerated people and staff could find a moment of peace and restoration, and championing legislation to replace the word *inmate* with *adult in custody*.[186]

Partnering with the Institute for Municipal and Regional Policy

>> In 2023, the Institute for Municipal and Regional Policy (IMRP) at the University of Connecticut, led by Andrew Clark, connected with Amend to improve policies in Connecticut's prisons. Clark had already established IMRP's International Justice Exchange program to provide correctional and other government leaders with firsthand experience in criminal justice systems outside the United States. This program took a group of academics, correctional officers, and correctional leaders from Connecticut to Norway in 2022 and to Germany in 2023. Through a partnership with Amend, IMRP facilitated another trip to Norway in September 2023 that incluåded the Connecticut DOC deputy commissioner, William Mulligan, and Patrick Hulin of the Connecticut governor's office, as well as delegations from other states.

Following that trip, Connecticut's DOC began a formal partnership with IMRP, Amend, and the Norwegian Correctional Services to promote culture change at two pilot sites, the Garner Correctional Institution and the York Correctional Institution, with the goal of expanding agency wide.[187]

To begin, staff members were encouraged to share their perspectives and align on goals. Then they were given opportunities to participate in Amend's partnerships with other domestic and international prisons, where they gained exposure to successful programs and best practices. Clark notes that this work is critical because "line officers [are now] allowed to cocreate what it looks like in their facility; they have never been asked and it has always been handed down. This paramilitary aspect of corrections is stifling, and they've been able to start changing it."[188]

CI Garner now has an Amend resource team, and CI York, the state's main prison for women, now has an Amend activity team, which empowers staff to act as change agents, cocreating with facility authorities what dynamic security can look like in their own units and facilities to resolve conflict and avoid solitary confinement. Goals for both include reducing violence, improving staff wellness with a focus on decreasing burnout, implementing dynamic security principles by cultivating positive relationships between staff and residents, and introducing normalization and progression principles.[189]

Corrections staff who had participated in the immersion program also launched a resource team focused on the BHU. The team sought to develop a spectrum of structured and individualized opportunities to participate in social activities with those in custody, such as playing basketball, cornhole, and board games and sharing meals.[190] In 2018, officers participated in Amend's classroom-based instruction and job shadowing in Norway and Oregon. Members of the team made this intervention their own by adding something that the Norwegian correctional officers had not incorporated: a peer mentoring role for people who had spent time in solitary confinement. Peer mentors assisted correctional officers in planning and participating in activities. This proved critical to building trust between staff and participants.[191]

Among participants who interacted at least three times with the resource team, there was a 55.7 percent reduction in the mean rate of disciplinary infractions in general and a 73.9 percent decrease in assaults.[192] Qualitative data indicates that staff from the resource team who engaged in these activities experienced lower "work-related stress, conflict, and violence [than] they had previously experienced in the BHU but also enhanced their job satisfaction and sense of occupational purpose."[193]

III. Skill-Building to Improve Reentry

For the more than 450,000 people released from state and federal prisons every year, reentry and reintegration into the community can be arduous.[194] Close to two-thirds of people who leave prison struggle with reintegration and are rearrested within three years of their release.[195] In part this is because prisons are not designed to prepare people for reentry.[196] Education and training programs are scarce and underfunded. Where prison work programs exist, they rarely provide transferable job experience, contributing to nearly 60 percent of formerly incarcerated people remaining unemployed a year after release.[197] And employment can be the least of the issues they face.

Without meaningful rehabilitation and training, many leave prison facing the same challenges that landed them there, but now with the stigma of a criminal record and its collateral consequences. These include temporary or permanent ineligibility for social benefits such as public housing and food assistance, disability or veteran's benefits, student aid, and occupational licensing; some people even face restrictions on parenting.[198] Employers and landlords with access to criminal record databases also may impose their own disqualifications.[199] The cumulative impact of these barriers is vast, diminishing a released individual's ability to form or rebuild family and community bonds.[200]

Skill building and job training programs such as Michigan's Vocational Villages and the Last Mile were created to address these challenges and help people prepare for reentry. Vocational Villages focus on providing hands-on training in high-demand trades such as automotive technology while fostering partnerships with local employers. Because Michigan's DOC oversees parole supervisions, agency staff can pair program participants with additional reentry support. In partnership with state correctional agencies, the Last Mile's coding program offers people the opportunity to gain software development skills while incarcerated, equipping them for the tech industry. By combining vocational training, strong partnerships with employers, and technical administrative fixes — such as state identification restoration or the issuing of commercial licenses — to overcome some post-sentence disqualifications, both initiatives are promising examples of ways to break the cycle of poverty, crime, and recidivism.

Michigan's Vocational Villages

The Michigan DOC launched its first Vocational Village in 2016 at the Richard A. Handlon Correctional Facility in Ionia. Since then, the program has expanded to two other facilities.[201] Vocational Village is a skilled trades training program that provides incarcerated people with career and technical education in trades with rich employment opportunities.[202] The DOC developed the program

TABLE 2

Vocational Village Sites in Michigan

YEAR ESTABLISHED	LOCATION	INSTRUCTORS*	TUTORS†	POPULATION AS OF SEPTEMBER 12, 2025
2016	Richard A. Handlon Correctional Facility, Ionia	9	15–20	136
2017	Parnall Correctional Facility, Jackson	9	15–20	187
2021	Women's Huron Valley Correctional Facility, Ypsilanti	8	12–16	108

Source: Michigan DOC.
* Instructors complete industry-specific training each year in addition to standard Michigan DOC–required employee training.
† Trade-specific tutors are current Villagers who have completed a certain amount of their trade program.

as part of its Offender Success Administration, which helps people reintegrate into society through case management, access to community resources, and evidence-based practices that reduce recidivism.[203]

The Villages are housed within specialized units in two men's prisons and one women's prison. They were designed to facilitate practical and applied learning techniques in various trades and industries. Each area within a unit is tailored for specific job training programs. The Villages currently offer 13 trade programs, some at multiple locations, and are open to individuals in Michigan DOC custody who are within 12 to 24 months of their earliest release date, provided they meet the application criteria and have the appropriate interest or aptitude for a trade.[204] Typically, Villagers are placed in vocations that position them for employment in their county of parole. If jobs are not available, students can either switch vocations or move their county of parole.

The program has capacity for almost 600 students with a variety of staff including instructors, job developers, reentry facility coordinators, parole agents, and employment counselors. To facilitate employer engagement, the Michigan DOC hosts recruitment events and job fairs. These events allow employers to meet with participants, conduct interviews, and potentially extend job offers prior to release.

Villagers engage in six and a half hours of unpaid vocational training each weekday. Instructors, many of them industry professionals, guide students through rigorous modules, helping them meet high standards of quality and safety. Programs have open enrollment, so Villagers can learn at their own pace rather than being part of a scheduled cohort.

Partners in the Business Community

Strong partnerships with businesses, employers, and industry leaders are integral to Vocational Villages' success. Employers learn about the Villages from the Michigan DOC or a participating employer and often lead conversations about the talent gaps they are seeking to fill. For example, the tree-trimming program was created in conjunction with Detroit Edison (DTE Energy), one of Michigan's major utility suppliers, and the state's International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers. The DTE Energy Foundation provided a $100,000 grant to get the program started.[205] In other cases, partnerships have helped expand offerings in a specific trade or sub-specialization. For instance, the training for auto mechanics has grown to include diesel mechanic content and provides access to Ford's online training modules. The DOC has formalized partnerships with about 10 employers, wich have not only hired multiple Villagers after release but assisted by donating equipment or helping develop curricula. Because of these trainings, hundreds of Michigan businesses have hired Villagers upon release.[206]

The Michigan DOC has taken steps beyond training to increase employability and bolster applicants' résumés. Instructors often train Villagers above the community-recognized certifications in their chosen trades. The DOC has also established a memorandum of understanding with Michigan's Department of Licensing and Regulatory Affairs, allowing Villagers to train and certify for licensed professions.[207] The state developed the Fidelity Bonding Program, which insures businesses against employee theft, forgery, or embezzlement for employees' first six months on the job. This encourages and sustains long-term employer participation; as an additional incentive, employers who hire Village graduates can earn $1,200 to $9,600 in tax credits for each person they hire.[208] According to Michigan DOC Director Heidi Washington, "The key to the program is that the department truly partners with the business community and continues to work with candidates until they secure employment, whether that happens prior to release or during their reentry process."[209]

TABLE 3

Vocational Villages: Summary of Trades

TRADE	LOCATIONS	CERTIFYING AGENCY	CERTIFICATIONS
3D Printing/Robotics	Women's Huron Valley Correctional Facility	Stratasys; FANUC	Stratasys Additive Manufacturing; FANUC iRVision Level I and 2
Automotive Technology	Parnall Correctional Facility; Richard A. Handlon Correctional Facility	Michigan Department of State	Engine Repair; Automatic Transmission; Manual Transmission; Front End; Suspension and Steering Systems; Brakes and Braking Systems; Electrical Systems; Heating and Air Conditioning Systems; Engine Tune-Up/Performance; Light Diesel Engine Repair
Carpentry	Parnall Correctional Facility; Richard A. Handlon Correctional Facility; Women's Huron Valley Correctional Facility (WHV)	National Center for Construction Education and Research (NCCER); Michigan Regional Council of Carpenters and Millwrights; Michigan Great Lakes OSHA	NCCER CORE; NCCER Carpentry Fundamentals; Career Connections; OSHA 30
CNC-Machine Tool/Robotics	Parnall Correctional Facility; Richard A. Handlon Correctional Facility	Immersive Engineering; Fuji Automatic Numerical Control (FANUC)	Haas Milling Machine Setup, Operation and Programing; Haas Lathe Setup, Operation and Programing; FANUC iRVision Level I and 2
Commercial Truck Driving	Parnall Correctional Facility; Women's Huron Valley Correctional Facility	Michigan Department of State	Commercial Learners Permit; Temporary Instructional Permit
Computer Coding*	Parnall Correctional Facility	Test on Software Applications (TOSA)	
Cosmetology	Women's Huron Valley Correctional Facility	Michigan Licensing and Regulatory Affairs	State of Michigan Cosmetology License
Food Technology	Richard A. Handlon Correctional Facility; Women's Huron Valley Correctional Facility	National Restaurant Association; American Hotel and Lodging Educational; Institute	ServSafe Manager; ProStart Level 1; ProStart Level 2; Skills, Tasks, and Results Training (START)
Forklift Certification	All Villages	Michigan Licensing and Regulatory Affairs	Equipment Operator Permit (Fork Truck)
Horticulture	Women's Huron Valley Correctional Facility	Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (MDARD); Michigan Nursery and Landscape Association	3A- Turfgrass Pest Mgt.; 3B-Ornamental Pest Management; 6- Right of Way; 1A- Field Crop; 1B- Fruit; 1C-Vegetable; Certified Green Industry Professional: Landscape Manager, Nurseryman, Landscape Contractor, Garden Retailer
Line Clearance/Tree Trim	Parnall Correctional Facility	Tree Care Industry Association; American Red Cross; MDARD; Great Lakes OSHA	Ground Operations Specialist; E-HAP and Aerial Rescue; CPR/First Aid/OSHA 30; Right of Way Pest Management
Masonry	Parnall Correctional Facility	National Center for Construction Education and Research (NCCER); Michigan Great Lakes Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA)	NCCER Core: Introduction to Basic Construction Skills; NCCER Masonry Level 1; NCCER Concrete Finishing Level 1; OSHA 30
Welding	Richard A. Handlon Correctional Facility	National Center for Construction Education and Research (NCCER); American Welding Society (AWS)	NCCER Core; AWS SENSE Level 1

Source: Michigan DOC.
* A more in-depth computer coding program is in development as of mid-2025, with multiple options for certifications built into the curriculum to educate students in technology systems, starting with fundamentals in systems, entrepreneurship, and professional communication. As students progress, they will learn advanced skills in Microsoft Suite software, IT, tech support, coding, and web design. This class will offer resources and credentials to enhance other Vocational Village student learning such as financial software for CDL students (QuickBooks), and computer aided design (AutoCAD, Fusion 360, Inventor, Revit) lessons for CNC and Building Trades students.

Life in the Units

Students participating in Vocational Village programming are housed together in a therapeutic learning environment. The physical design of the Villages, while different at each facility, attempts to foster a sense of purpose and community by creating an immersive educational setting for the trades being taught. Days are structured to model the rhythm of work life. Participants eat together and travel together to work areas. Daily instruction is split into a mix of practical skills and classroom learning. For example, students in the commercial driver's license program spend time practicing on the big truck simulators in the practical skills section of the classroom and complete a "theory training" course that shaves a week to 10 days from post-release coursework required for certification. Villagers in this program also learn the importance of healthy eating habits, personal hygiene, and exercise while on the road. Thus, Villagers gain not only technical expertise but important life skills.

Unlike traditional correctional settings, the Vocational Village requires staff to adopt a supportive and mentorship-oriented approach. Staff undergo specialized training on cultivating a constructive learning environment and prioritizing participants' personal and professional growth. This approach yields an atmosphere that feels like a school environment. Instructors participate in industry-specific training every year in addition to regular DOC-required employee training, keeping up to date with the trade even if they are no longer involved on a commercial level.

The Reentry Puzzle

Because the Michigan DOC has authority over both corrections and parole, it is able to promote success at every level.[210] For example, while they are still in the program, students work with job developers to complete applications, and employment counselors are dedicated to helping them secure interviews and work.

With the support of the state legislature, the department has made significant investments in housing, social assistance, and health insurance to address common issues faced by people returning from incarceration. This results in a seamless transition from custodial supervision to support from the DOC's field operations, improving continuity of services and care. For example, if a Villager is unable to find work in the county where they will be paroled, the DOC can transfer their parole jurisdiction to one with more available jobs.

Michigan has also helped incarcerated people obtain identification, health, and other personal documents they need to apply for jobs prior to release. This process started off slowly, with a mobile ID van that visited state facilities four times a year, assisting a few hundred people. But the DOC has since funded a full-time position in the secretary of state's office out of its own discretionary budget. The DOC assists people who have been designated for parole in obtaining the required documents, paperwork, and photos and then forwards those documents directly to the Michigan Department of State to process either a driver's license or state ID. This has enabled 99 percent of people to be issued a new valid state ID or license upon release. The department also works with Road to Restoration, a free clinic that assists Michigan residents in restoring their driving privileges. Finally, a memorandum of understanding with the state licensing department allows the DOC to provide statements that help students coming out of the Village pass the character and fitness portions of various licensing exams.[211]

Preliminary Outcomes

Although data is still being collected, early results from the Vocational Village program suggest that it is reducing recidivism and improving employment outcomes among participants. According to DOC data, 2019 Village graduates had a recidivism rate 6.5 percentage points lower than the overall recidivism rate for all people released from Michigan DOC facilities in 2019 (15.6 percent versus 22.1 percent).[212] From the program's launch in 2016 through July 2023, just 12.6 percent of Villagers returned to prison at some point after their release, about half the return rate for all people whom Michigan DOC released in 2020. The employment rate for Villagers in the fall of 2024 was 64.2 percent, slightly higher than the national employment rate of 60.1 percent.[213]

Employers including Ford Motor Company and Habitat for Humanity, along with trade unions, report high levels of satisfaction with the skills and readiness of Vocational Village graduates. As one employer told the Chamber of Commerce Foundation, "I've been doing this for 35 years, and the number of people today who show up every day and want to work eight hours a day are few and far between. These two people [from Vocational Village] seemed highly motivated. They really want to take a step in the right direction."[214]

Beyond economic outcomes, the program has had a profound impact on participants' self-esteem and sense of purpose. Many graduates report feeling more confident and hopeful about their future, which are critical factors in long-term success. One graduate who went on to a job in construction after release told reporters, "I do feel more equipped and more confident to do something better than what I was doing."[215] Another Villager said, "After getting in this program, I realized that I could actually have a career. We got companies coming in here regularly, hiring us straight out of prison. I look forward to getting one of these jobs with these companies coming in."[216]

Looking to the Future

The Michigan DOC has expressed a commitment to expanding and diversifying the Vocational Village program. Plans are underway to introduce training for emerging industries such as technology-based trades, vertical farm-

ing, and expansive energy infrastructure. The department also has plans to transform the Thumb Correctional Facility in the town of Lapeer so that everyone there is engaged in post-secondary education or vocational training. DOC Director Washington emphasizes that these changes are being done with care and not just for the sake of expansion, stressing that it's important for states to do what they can but to still do it well and that replication should not be pursued at the expense of quality.[217]

The Last Mile

Unlike Michigan's Vocational Villages, which are run through the Michigan DOC, the Last Mile is a nonprofit organization that partners with correctional systems nationwide to bring training in high-tech industries into prisons.[218] Founded in California by entrepreneurs Chris Redlitz and Beverly Parenti in 2010, the program now operates 18 classrooms across eight states, offering training in web development, audio and video production, and emerging technologies.[219]

Many prisons that offer vocational training have more traditional programs, including courses in the building and construction trades and automotive skills. But when it comes to technology, prisons have struggled to keep pace with the world around them. Technology within prisons is often years — if not decades — behind what is available to the broader public. People who are incarcerated are mostly denied access to the internet or to personal computers and smartphones, even in classrooms.[220] Many lack even basic digital skills, such as typing, emailing, and navigating websites.

The Last Mile seeks to offer incarcerated people a wider range of post-release possibilities and has worked to create pathways to employment in software engineering and media production. In the organization's classrooms, cohorts of students work 30 to 40 hours a week over the course of 12 months, completing academic and practical coursework. Support teams coach students to prepare reentry goals and plans for their upcoming release dates. When graduates of the program leave prison, they do so with employable skills and a network of program staff and fellow alumni to support them.

From its start at San Quentin Rehabilitation Center (formerly San Quentin State Prison), the program has developed an adaptable classroom model and robust post-release mentoring. Since its inception, more than 1,500 incarcerated people have participated in the Last Mile's courses, with nearly three-quarters finding employment within six months of release.

The Approach

To build a pipeline of employers, the Last Mile looked to the tech industry, citing an estimate that over the next six years there would be one million unfilled coding jobs.[221] In tech, Redlitz saw an industry that cared more about the quality of the work than the background or even location of the coder.[222] The organization worked with the California Correctional Training and Rehabilitation Authority (formerly the California Prison Industry Authority) to build out programs for web development, launching its flagship Code.7370 program in an old print factory in San Quentin's industries building in 2015.[223] The novel format presented certain challenges — notably, building a coding curriculum for students without access to the internet. Nevertheless, early classes succeeded, with instructors from coding boot camp Hack Reactor providing offline materials and finding work-arounds to offer instruction. Students graduated with web development portfolios and new skills, with many finding jobs and apprenticeships and enrolling in higher education.

As the Last Mile expanded beyond California, it formalized its web development curriculum and added a second course, audio and video production, in 2021.[224] Course developers realized that program graduates could benefit from technical gig-work opportunities in industries like entertainment, production, and sports, which have less emphasis on traditional career paths. The curriculum was bolstered by partnerships with LinkedIn Learning and SiriusXM.[225]

Subsequent additions to the curricula continue to focus on employability. The Last Mile's React module, introduced in 2015, taught a fast-growing JavaScript code library as part of the web development course and yielded immediate dividends for graduates. In recent years, increasing interest in artificial intelligence has spurred the creation of a machine learning module within the organization's coding course.

Looking ahead, the Last Mile plans to expand its programming and reach a wider portion of the incarcerated population. New offerings in skilled trades, such as solar roofing apprenticeships, and industry-agnostic tracks in project management, sales, entrepreneurship, and IT promise to equip graduates with skills transferable across sectors and regions.[226]

Classrooms in Carceral Environments

Tight physical security and a lack of internet access are common features in prisons. Further, classroom space, staffing availability, and student access can vary not only across systems but even across facilities within a system. Some prisons, like San Quentin, can house five classrooms, while others have space for only one. In addition, different security levels allow different privileges; in some facilities, students with laptops can remain in the general population, while in others, they must be moved to the same housing unit. To meet these challenges, the Last Mile has developed a hybrid model with both remote and in-person participation over two six-month units.

At least once a week, program instructors, many of whom are program graduates, videoconference into classrooms to introduce new concepts, progress through the curriculum, help students build their portfolios, respond to questions, and give feedback.

In the classrooms, students spend most of their time on the Last Mile's technology platform, which offers access to an offline environment with instructional materials and practical resources. The platform is intended to mirror the experience of learning and working outside the prison walls; it employs Canvas, a learning management system used in colleges, and an intranet with preloaded content like parts of Wikipedia, stock images, and internal coding-help forums.[227] Between lessons, students use the platform to complete homework and personal projects, working largely at their own pace. Students are encouraged to work collaboratively and progress as a cohort, with those further ahead helping those who are behind.

In-person monitors help bridge the gap between the classroom and the outside. These monitors, usually corrections staff, run day-to-day operations and upload student homework. Quick questions can go to the monitors, who have the classroom's sole unrestricted internet connection, making them "the local Google."[228] But students can also rely on the Last Mile's remote help desk to get individualized, targeted assistance within minutes.

This hybrid model can be tailored to each student's (and facility's) needs. Some students come to the Last Mile having minimal experience with any computer, let alone coding, but the self-guided model helps them find paths that suit their knowledge and ambitions. All students are expected to progress through the standard curriculum, including the more technical parts, but have the flexibility to choose supplementary modules, such as basic computer skills or more advanced classes.[229]

Reentry Support and Alumni Networks

The Last Mile's model for reform looks beyond the classroom. Before students are released, the organization works with them to plan for reentry. Pre-release interviews and assessments with the program's reentry department help the organization evaluate what pathways and referrals would be useful to each student. After students are released, they join a growing network of alumni that is open to all former students, whether they graduate or not. This model recognizes that completing a program can be out of one's control: housing transfers, early releases, and disciplinary actions can cut short a person's time in the program.

A cornerstone of the network is the alumni success team, made up of former participants who understand the challenges of reentering society. Reentry coaches have regular one-on-one meetings with alumni to plan for professional success. They prepare students not just to put together a résumé but to address incarceration in their cover letter, to frame their experience learning in prison, and to navigate the background check process.[230] Twice-weekly virtual coffee chats provide an easy and informal way to stay connected to the network.[231]

Mindful of the economic realities for people leaving prison, the Last Mile gives all participants a laptop upon release, whether they plan to pursue coding or not. While direct job placement opportunities are limited, the program has focused on finding hiring partners and building out internship tracks, with relationships in tech (Slack), sports (the Indiana Pacers), media (NBC Universal), and other fields. The Last Mile also believes that the organization can be its own hiring partner. As of 2025, 70 percent of the program's 60 employees were graduates or participants. They serve as instructors, reentry coaches, software engineers, and managers, working to create a program responsive to their students' experiences and needs.

Strategic Partnerships

Like other initiatives featured in this report, the Last Mile has forged relationships with state agencies and governments, fostering support for its work across administrations and budget cycles. It has also built partnerships with a range of private corporations, foundations, and coalitions that have worked with the program to supplement public funding and make in-kind contributions. Technology companies have lent technical, skill-based, and content-based assistance, allowing the Last Mile to provide its students with opportunities for concrete professional development.[232]

The founders' business backgrounds have helped, as have relationships in politics that have smoothed the road for expansion into new states and connections to tech founders that have led to institutional collaborations. Expansion has also been supported by donations from foundations and philanthropic institutions.[233] Fundamentally, the work speaks for itself: The Last Mile's ability to attract support has been a testament to the success of the model and the demand for innovative, pragmatic prison reforms.

Preliminary Outcomes

Researchers employed by the organization measure reentry trajectories, identifying former participants who return to custody and fielding surveys on employment, financial status, and progress toward reentry goals. The program has demonstrated positive outcomes: As of March 2025, only 8 percent of former students had been reincarcerated for a new offense, whether they had graduated or not.[234]

The Last Mile credits the low incidence of recidivism to its students' strong employment rates. Since the program launched in 2015, more than 70 percent of the program's alumni have been employed within six months of release.[235] By contrast, in 2018, the most recent year for which nationwide data is available, only 54 percent

of formerly incarcerated people found employment within a year of their release.[236] With the provision of wraparound employment services, people coming out of the Last Mile's programs have had success keeping and holding stable employment, a proven factor in reducing recidivism.[237] To better understand this success, the Crime and Justice Policy Lab at the University of Pennsylvania received support from Ken Griffin and the Stand Together Foundation to conduct a randomized control trial studying the impact of Last Mile courses on recidivism.[238]

Looking to the Future

Expansion is in the works for several new sites in 2026, including the program's first classroom in Connecticut. The organization is also launching new curriculum tracks and introducing social enterprise initiatives, which will allow graduates to become owner-operators in for-profit businesses affiliated with the Last Mile. Over the next several years, the organization's new partnership department hopes to identify even more potential employers for its graduates, especially with the rise of "fair chance" employment advocacy, which promotes policies that tackle barriers faced by formerly incarcerated individuals when reentering the workforce.[239]

IV. A System-Wide Approach: The Maine Model of Corrections

While corrections reforms focused on dignity and humane treatment typically start small, either in a single unit or with a small cohort, the Maine DOC recently took a different approach. Starting in 2022, the agency reviewed its ongoing reform efforts and reorganized its operations statewide. Dubbed the "Maine Model of Corrections," the new approach has embraced normalization, humanization, and destigmatization principles throughout the state.[240]

Although correctional styles from Europe informed the new policy, correctional leaders did not make a trip to Europe. Instead, the Maine Model was the result of homegrown experimentation in recent decades. Starting in 2002, the Maine DOC implemented a series of policies and practices designed for the distinctive needs of incarcerated women, including the adoption of trauma-informed models of treatment and care.[241] After a scathing 2011 report detailing the department's overuse of solitary confinement, correctional leaders worked with advocates to introduce policies focused on rehabilitation over punishment.[242] Maine has succeeded in scaling back the use of restrictive housing considerably and improving conditions for those who remain, including by introducing broader access to a variety of congregant activities.[243]

Incremental steps were taken through each initiative, including destigmatizing language within women's services, addressing trauma and behavioral concerns with social and recreational programming rather than with solitary confinement, and building out progressive disciplinary and classification systems. In changing the long-standing security-only framework, the Maine DOC found that all residents, not just those at highest or lowest risk, benefit from more opportunities for rehabilitation and reentry preparation, and that staff benefit from safer conditions fostered by improved relationships with residents. With the addition of coaching and mentoring as core parts of their job, staff also have a greater sense of purpose and improved mental health.[244] While Maine has a smaller population than most states and incarcerates fewer than 2,000 people, its story offers lessons in propagating reforms throughout an entire prison system.[245] Like larger departments, the Maine DOC has struggled with staffing shortages and budget constraints; now it has shown what is possible under these challenging conditions.[246]

While Maine has implemented its reforms system-wide, this report focuses on three facilities as representative samples: Maine Correctional Center, Southern Maine Women's Reentry Center, and Maine State Prison.[247]

The Physical Environment

Mirroring the philosophies of programs like Restoring Promise and the Scandinavian Prison Project, the Maine Model undertook significant physical modifications to its state's prisons. Uniquely, Maine's physical changes have yielded opportunities not just for recreation and relationship-building, but for employment and community service as well.[248]

Maine Correctional Center and Maine State Prison feature gardens and greenhouses maintained entirely by residents. At both facilities, residents can obtain a master gardener certification, offered in partnership with the University of Maine Cooperative Extension.[249] Some DOC facilities also have farms, which, like the gardens and greenhouses, produce food that helps nourish people at the facility while also supporting community food banks.[250] Maine State Prison grows roughly 28,000 pounds of produce per year and donates about 3,000 pounds of it to local pantries.[251]

Maine Correctional Center and the Southern Maine Women's Reentry Center

Maine Correctional Center and the Southern Maine Women's Reentry Center, both in the town of Windham, house roughly a quarter of the state's prison population. A 2016 expansion plan, budgeted at $150 million, would have added 200 beds to Maine Correctional Center. By 2019, however, the project was reoriented around the more ambitious goal of improving conditions across this facility, focusing on providing improved mental, social, and emotional health services and support.[252]

At Maine Correctional Center, traditional prison buildings dating as far back as 1919 were torn down. New facilities were designed to support rehabilitation, with housing units, outdoor spaces, and visitation areas offering more space for programs and more accommodations for visiting family, including one room with a play area for children.[253] While older buildings in the complex retain traditional prison features, such as cinder-block walls and small windows, roughly 80 percent of the facilities were renovated; most residents now live in updated units.[254]

Living areas eschew traditional prison features like unfinished concrete, noisy metal doors, and echoing spaces. Instead, walls are painted with warm accents and cells have wooden doors that close quietly. Carpeted areas and sound-dampening panels on the walls help reduce noise. Daylight comes in through large skylights, and modernized HVAC systems provide improved climate control, an often neglected but much needed utility in prisons, where people do not have the option to go somewhere warmer or cooler in inclement weather, or even the opportunity to have an extra blanket or a fan.[255] Completed in 2022, the renovation project came in $7 million under budget, proving that the new, more empathetic style can be cheaper than classic concrete-and-steel security-focused prisons.[256]

The Southern Maine Women's Reentry Center is a minimum-security pre-release facility housing up to 97 women.[257] The facility resembles a college student center, with carpeted floors, pastel-shaded walls, and sweeping views through generously sized windows. Common areas are furnished with upholstered lounge chairs and low-slung coffee tables. Cells are grouped in corner alcoves, visible to staff but affording a level of privacy impossible with traditional prison corridors. Cells are modeled after college dormitories as well, with wooden beds, dressers, and desks. But they lack toilets, a typical feature of most prison cells; instead, residents share centrally located bathrooms, a substantial step toward normalization.

Special Units at Maine State Prison

Maine State Prison is a medium- and maximum-security facility for men in the town of Warren that houses roughly 45 percent of the state's incarcerated population. The higher security needs have limited the scope of workable physical improvements due to structural and logistical constraints that other facilities in the state do not face. Still, the DOC has worked to prioritize the well-being of residents and staff. Even the simplest aesthetic adjustments can have positive effects by humanizing the environment.

Residents have been permitted to replace stark white paint with color in common areas, including the visitation room. Themed murals liven up housing units and program buildings. Residents working in the greenhouse share their skills, showing off potted plants in housing units and staff offices as well as flowers and trimmed grass lining the walkways.

More extensive updates have come to several specialized housing units. Two units in the prison's medium-security block are designated as "honor pods" for residents with lower custody levels and clean disciplinary records. Physically, these units are similar to their counterparts. They have the same triangular shape, with two stories of cells lining the walls and tables, chairs, and bookshelves in the central common areas. But cell doors are unlocked during the day, and even unit doors are typically left open. This transforms the experience of being on the unit. Rather than feeling closed in and isolated, residents can move freely and even go outside at will. Correctional officers are not always present on the unit, only checking in occasionally. This not only gives residents more autonomy but also eases the burden of staffing shortages by reducing the need for constant, direct supervision.

The most transformative redesign at Maine State Prison is the introduction of the Earned Living Unit (ELU), the prison's most open and unrestricted housing. Replacing

the facility's former solitary confinement unit, the ELU exemplifies normalization and humanization. In 2021, the warden encouraged a steering committee of residents and staff to propose improvements to the unit, with Norway's Halden Prison as an inspiration.[258] With the backing of Commissioner Randall Liberty and then Warden Matthew Magnusson, committee members took the opportunity to totally reimagine the unit's purpose and practice.

Residents did much of the labor, not only scrubbing and painting but also starting the unit's garden. Several of the ELU's current and former residents were men who had spent time in the unit's old cells, 23 hours a day for months or even years. Huge windows along one wall now provide views of the yard and the garden. Rather than cells arranged around one communal area, the ELU has distinct common and housing areas. Residents have access to tools like kitchen knives, a stove, and a full-size refrigerator. The outdoor area has also undergone a profound transformation. Instead of recreation cages, an open space is flanked by painted planters and a grassy yard. Men in the prison's dog-training program walk their pups around the grass, and residents tend a garden that yields bushels of produce throughout the growing season for use in the prison or donation to the local community.[259]

Staff–Resident Dynamics

As residents of Maine's prisons have been afforded more autonomy, staff roles have adapted. Direct supervision has lessened. Officers check in on a regular basis, but units do not require constant staff oversight. Rather than waiting for correctional officers to unlock several doors, residents can sign themselves out to leave the building for recreation, education, or work. Residents of Southern Maine Women's Reentry Center are trusted with extensive liberty inside and outside the facility, and many leave during the day for work or volunteer opportunities.

With reforms underway, the DOC reevaluated its policies and expectations for staff. Department leaders recognize that they are asking correctional officers to be more than just security personnel. Besides basic law enforcement training, all facility employees are now trained in mental health first aid and in CR2 ("Creating Regulation and Resilience"), a de-escalation communication model. When the Maine Model was formally implemented, the leaders of each facility took their staff through an eight-hour curriculum focused on normalization and culture change.[260]

In recent years, the department has launched additional training to support staff development. The 21st Century Leadership Academy, a mandatory 40-hour course launched in 2024, trains supervisory staff in decision-making, social intelligence, and coaching skills. In addition, the department has created role-specific staff supports, such as the 24-hour Field Training Officer Academy for experienced officers mentoring new recruits and a five-day Wellness Specialists Orientation for staff who offer peer support.[261]

The Maine DOC also created new staff roles, including correctional acuity specialists and correctional care and treatment workers. Correctional acuity specialists have security duties but receive additional training in crisis management, de-escalation, and motivational interviewing. People in this position are responsible for identifying and managing behavioral health crises.[262] The proactive social requirements of this role attract correctional officers who find fulfillment in human connection. Correctional care and treatment workers serve a role similar to that of a caseworker and can assess residents for programming, develop individual case plans, and help create reentry plans. They are assigned to specific units, working with management teams to help defuse day-to-day disagreements and ensure a stable environment.[263]

Beyond training, the Maine DOC has adjusted expectations for staff conduct, viewing routine interactions as possible intervention points for positive behavioral management and trust-building. For example, residents at Maine State Prison are often permitted to address staff by their first names and shake hands. When possible, facilities strive to keep corrections staff on the same units over time to build ongoing collegial relationships with residents. Staff describe the trust placed in residents as both institutional and personal, earned through human interaction rather than just via system metrics such as a clean disciplinary record. Some staff recalled success stories — seeing formerly incarcerated people doing well in the community after their releases.[264]

A recent initiative, the Pathfinders Reentry Focused Outdoor Project, has extended this ethos past the facility walls, allowing small groups of residents and staff to embark on multiday trips featuring backpacking, camping, fishing, sailing, or canoeing. The excursions intentionally have staff and residents working together, engaging each other person-to-person rather than uniform-to-uniform.[265]

The DOC has also set up more formal structures designed to strengthen relationships. Each facility, for example, has a Resident Advisory Council comprising residents and staff.[266] The residents on a council typically meet every couple of weeks, while full councils meet quarterly. Council members help inform facility policy and address quality of life issues like tablet use and lockdown practices, which require people to be confined in their cells. Lockdowns have become more frequent in Maine and other states as a way to reduce the workload in understaffed facilities.[267] Seeking a more humane approach, the councils discuss ways to minimize blanket lockdowns by rotating staff to alternate housing units or to central buildings to keep educational, programmatic, and recreational facilities open.

Resident Rehabilitation

As in other models, the Maine DOC provides concrete opportunities for residents to build skills, enhance their health and well-being, and further their education so they can more successfully return to their communities after leaving prison.

Education

The DOC was an early participant in Second Chance Pell Grants, a federal program launched in 2015 that provided financial aid to incarcerated students seeking postsecondary education.[268] These grants, along with support from the Sunshine Lady Foundation, allowed the department to develop new educational programs in tandem with implementation of the Maine Model.[269] The programs vary according to each facility and its population. Maine State Prison has a wealth of postsecondary opportunities, in part because people there serve longer sentences. Options range from GED prep to master's degree–level courses offered by the University of Maine system. As of July 2025, one resident was even a PhD candidate.

Maine State Prison allows residents to host classes (including a recent one that focused on improving communication and understanding among people of diverse faiths, sexualities, and other identities). Maine Correctional Center has a variety of in-person and online classes, and the DOC permits residents to take on and teach advanced coursework across facilities via Zoom and Coursera.

Postsecondary Education in Prison

>> **By 2031, nearly three-quarters of all jobs will expect** candidates to have some postsecondary education or training.[270] But for decades, access to higher education for people who are — or have been — incarcerated has been severely restricted. The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 revoked their eligibility for the Pell Grant, a need-based grant program for low-income undergraduate students.[271] This had the ripple effect of denying them any state or federal aid that used Pell Grant eligibility as a shortcut to describe need, and effectively dismantled many if not most existing postsecondary education programs for incarcerated people.[272]

Academic education is critical to closing the gap between formerly incarcerated people and their peers. Forty percent of people in state prisons have not even earned a high school credential; another 45 percent have only a GED or high school diploma.[273] Outside prison, half of the U.S. population has at least an associate's degree, with 40 percent attaining a bachelor's degree or higher.[274] This gap in education results in a disparity in opportunity and earnings, which disproportionately affects minorities and especially people of color.[275] But the gap can close. College-in-prison programs have been linked to increased employment opportunities, stronger families, and safer prison environments.[276] Their students have a 43 percent lower chance of returning to prison than those who do not participate.[277] This translates into substantial taxpayer savings and averted costs, with estimates suggesting that providing postsecondary education to people who are incarcerated could cut state prison spending across the United States by as much as $365 million annually.[278]

After incarcerated people lost access to need-based aid, other programs stepped in. The Bard Prison Initiative has awarded more than 760 college degrees; NJ-STEP partners with colleges such as Princeton University and Rutgers University–Newark; and Hudson Link for Higher Education in Prison, founded by incarcerated people, now operates in five New York State prisons.[279] Private philanthropies such as the Gates Foundation and the Sunshine Lady Foundation have also stepped up to fund educational opportunities.[280] But these efforts can only go so far. A coalition of advocates, including formerly incarcerated leaders, undertook a yearslong campaign to reverse the Pell Grant ban, and Congress lifted the prohibition in December 2020.[281]

Today, postsecondary prison education programs have proliferated with broad bipartisan support. In fact, a recent Brennan Center poll found that around 90 percent of Republicans and Democrats support requiring prisons to offer education programs.[282] Some are noncredit workshops, while others are full degree-granting programs housed within a facility. The Alliance for Higher Education in Prison provides critical infrastructure for these programs through its national network.[283] Although the reinstatement of Pell Grants is a monumental achievement, significant challenges persist in effective implementing and scaling quality postsecondary education programs in prisons. Many correctional facilities lack adequate classroom space, reliable internet access, and up-to-date technology critical for modern higher education. Some states — such as Michigan, which plans to expand its Vocational Village concept into a facility-wide postsecondary education hub — are embracing the opportunity for change.[284] Others, such as Georgia and Pennsylvania, continue to prohibit incarcerated students from accessing state financial aid programs.[285]

Skill-Building

On top of in-facility education and training, the Maine DOC has developed remote opportunities that allow residents to teach at nearby colleges and work as paralegals and software designers.[286] As of March 2025, 166 people in DOC custody (including 12 working remotely) were participating in work release programs, and the number may rise as high as 350 as seasonal demand for labor rises.[287]

In addition to providing training and certification, some staff take advantage of relationships in their communities to arrange jobs for residents before they are released. At Maine Correctional Center, kitchen managers have helped people obtain food service apprenticeships. At Maine State Prison, staff have helped obtain trade work for residents who have demonstrated skills such as carpentry or the ability to work with specialized machines, making and developing goods for the facility's correctional industries shop, which sells items like furniture, art, and sundries — all designed and made by incarcerated people.[288] This level of staff involvement has not been replicated in other states, where it is still rare for correctional staff to leverage personal relationships to support residents post-release. The difference in Maine is the emphasis on positive relationships between residents and staff, made possible by the system's size and the Maine Model's support for these efforts.

Mental and Behavioral Health Support

Maine DOC programming places a strong emphasis on addressing the underlying needs that put people in prison, including mental and behavioral health needs. Evidence-based behavioral health services are available to all residents. People who have acute psychiatric needs are referred to Maine State Prison's Intensive Mental Health Unit, a restricted-custody housing unit where a team of clinicians meets daily to develop treatment plans and provide wraparound mental health services. The unit has a population of roughly 25 and averages six individual therapy sessions a day.[289]

The Maine Model also features an intensive focus on substance use disorder treatment and recovery. Nearly 50 percent of the incarcerated population receives medication-assisted treatment (MAT) for opioid use disorder, compared with less than 1 percent of the federal prison population in 2021.[290] (MAT is the standard treatment for opioid use disorder and has been a critical intervention in fighting the opioid epidemic.)[291] In addition to clinical treatment, residents are assisted through peer support models, which provide opportunities to discuss concerns and challenges with others who have successfully done recovery work. In 2024, more than 70 residents statewide were trained recovery coaches.[292]

Preliminary Outcomes

The Maine DOC tracks a range of metrics, such as violent incidents, restrictive housing population, and return-to-custody rates. It hasn't yet systematically studied the impact of reforms on these outcomes, however, because it is simply too early to do so. For example, to study recidivism rates, the DOC tracks release cohorts. But the current cohorts being tracked were largely released before the most recent reforms were announced and implemented: 2012 through 2021 for the DOC's three-year observation study and 2014 through 2023 for its one-year observation study. This makes it difficult to isolate and understand the impact of the most recent changes.

However, the numbers DOC does have point to positive effects. For example, in 2017, 30.5 percent of people released from one of its facilities were reincarcerated within three years. When the Maine Model was formally codified and instituted in 2022, only 21.4 percent of those released in the same year were reincarcerated within three years — a reduction of nearly one-third.[293] Because other contributing factors may affect these results, the department is taking steps to better assess the effects of its reforms. This includes transitioning to a new case management system that creates unified language and metrics for reporting, which should improve its ability to measure post-release outcomes, including employment.

To better understand the culture of corrections in Maine beyond its current range of metrics, Brennan Center researchers partnered with the DOC to conduct baseline surveys and meetings with incarcerated residents and staff (see appendix).[294] The DOC also provided aggregated administrative data for 2017 to 2024. Combined with survey findings, this data provides a fuller picture of the day-to-day realities for people working and living in the state's prison system. Overall, it's clear that Maine's investments in culture change for staff and residents have helped make its facilities safer, calmer, and more humane.

Reduction in Violence

Maine's average prison population has dropped significantly, from 2,383 in November 2017 to 2,069 in November 2025.[295] Lower prison populations tend to bring less-crowded facilities, smaller caseloads, and other benefits. Safety, as measured by violence within facilities, has drastically improved. While it is unclear how much of the dramatic positive change is due to smaller populations and how much to the Maine Model, the data shows double-digit percentage drops in population-adjusted rates of all types of violent incidents. This includes a 40 percent reduction in assaults between residents and a 36

percent reduction in resident assaults on staff. Perhaps more remarkably, use-of-force incidents by staff have dropped 69 percent.[296]

Brennan Center researchers surveyed staff and residents in the state's two largest facilities, Maine State Prison in October 2024 and Maine Correctional Center in March 2025. The surveys revealed that 73 percent of staff and 65 percent of residents agreed that they felt safe in their facilities.[297] Maine State Prison experienced reductions in its rates of violence, similar to lower-security facilities that were able to make more substantial changes in environment, with a notable 84 percent decrease in self-inflicted injuries among residents. In meetings, staff described having "quiet days"— meaning fewer incidents and an overall calmer environment — contrasting them with a past when desensitization to violence was the norm.[298] Research also shows that reductions in violence are linked to lower associated costs, improved rehabilitation outcomes, and reduced recidivism.[299]

Better Staff–Resident Relationships

Staff and residents highlighted respect and rehabilitation as major themes in their survey responses. In meetings, staff noted the shift from an "us versus them" mentality toward a culture of cooperation. This is bolstered by policy changes that allow staff to stay assigned to units longer, which encourages stronger connections with residents and an environment where casual conversation has become the norm. Now, residents are no longer seen as "ratting" simply for talking to a correctional officer.[300] Because 78 percent of residents agreed that staff behavior influences their behavior, for better or for worse, it's significant that residents also highlighted the positive effects of a caring and engaged staff.[301]

These effects show up in quantitative data as significant decreases in disciplinary cases and in restrictive housing use. Across all facilities, disciplinary cases are down 25 percent from 2017. At Maine State Prison, case rates have declined by 42 percent — equivalent to 1,121 fewer disciplinary cases a year. This is a clear benefit to a workforce that is already overworked and understaffed.[302] It's no surprise, then, that staff respondents to the Brennan Center survey were broadly supportive of reform efforts, with three-quarters of them agreeing that rehabilitation should be central to incarceration.

Looking to the Future

The state DOC remains committed to the Maine Model of Corrections. That said, the system faces several challenges. Most critically, the Maine Model needs to be sustained across budget cycles to achieve its aims, but budget allocations have failed to keep pace with rising operating costs. Tight funding has forced Maine DOC facilities to adjust operations and has hindered program expansions.[303]

Federal cuts have also undermined reform efforts. In April 2025, the U.S. Department of Justice canceled three grants totaling approximately $1.5 million simply because the Maine DOC housed a transgender woman in a women's facility.[304] These grants funded substance use treatment for roughly 300 people, along with programs supporting incarcerated parents and innovations in probation. The grants were reinstated in June 2025, but uncertainty around future federal support remains.[305] These cuts, and federal cuts to other social services across Maine, mean that departments like the Maine DOC will likely grow more dependent on state dollars.[306] Without external support, lawmakers are increasingly forced to choose between funding for corrections and funding for other important policy areas, such as education, job training, and affordable housing.[307]

But significant demonstrable gains in safety inside and outside Maine's prison walls affirm the department's reform project and its political viability. In-prison violence has been sharply reduced, and more people are leaving prison for good. As mentioned above, the three-year recidivism rate was down nearly 10 percentage points from 2017.[308] Improvements in the system have also spurred wider action. Maine's legislature passed a bill funding a pilot program providing six months of transitional housing for individuals recently released from prison.[309] With a clear guiding vision and growing support, Maine will continue its system-wide work and can serve as an example for other states.

V. Challenges and Opportunities for Corrections Reform

Changing the culture of any institution is difficult. Corrections professionals say it's exceptionally hard in their field. Long-established policies and practices shape conventions in institutional behavior, and at the agency, facility, or unit level, these evolve slowly. Even when the consequences of mistakes are violent and potentially deadly, changes to address them come up against resistance. When new policies are implemented, institutional actors may continue to abide by obsolete norms or practices regardless of their inefficiency or despite the fact that they may compound existing traumas.[310] Yet the success of programs highlighted in this report demonstrates that change is possible.

A Brennan Center team visited select programs and initiatives in 10 states from March 2023 to July 2024 and, across a wider set of jurisdictions, interviewed current and former correctional leaders, technical assistance providers, and researchers responsible for program evaluation. A small team of Brennan Center researchers also conducted 467 staff and incarcerated resident surveys and convened two staff meetings in Maine to assess perceptions of the state's ongoing reform efforts.[311] (For a more detailed methodology, see the appendix.)

The following section outlines the perspectives of these insiders who are on the front lines of culture change nationwide. With this information, policymakers in other jurisdictions may be inspired to explore similar reforms and adapt them to the specific needs of their facilities and states. It can also help those interested in reform anticipate obstacles and embrace strategies that increase the likelihood of success.[312]

Common Challenges to Implementing, Scaling, and Replicating Reform

According to most stakeholders, the traditional punitive model of supervision is tough to overcome because the overall infrastructure in U.S. corrections and the training that staff receive have been designed to perpetuate this approach. Moreover, resource constraints, whether human or fiscal, can put pressure on the long-term sustainability of reform initiatives. When prisons are understaffed, front-line personnel struggle to find time or energy for additional trainings or changes, no matter how positive. When prisons are underfunded, experimental approaches take a back seat to critical and more commonplace programs, such as those supporting behavioral health.

Enduring Traditional Power Structures

Nationally, staff training and education still focus on the coercive control of people, emphasizing punitive techniques and disciplinary processes rather than skill-building in social and behavioral management.[313] According to one Maine correctional leader, "Initially, the hardest challenge was the old-school corrections mentality of 'us versus them.'" A nonprofit leader noted that "even though DOCs [have] a strong chain of command, line staff have incredible discretion in their day-to-day work, which means they can resist change efforts and ultimately tank their success if they are not on board."[314] At the same time, according to a former corrections official from Washington State, many officers in prisons today were hired and trained during the Covid-19 pandemic era, when stricter policies were in place. He observed that in the prisons he visited, "60 to 70 percent of the staff were hired during Covid-19, when everything was locked down. You didn't have open movement, you didn't have people going to programs, in the yard, in the dayrooms. Staff aren't accustomed to those things now."[315] In North Dakota, another correctional leader acknowledged that the Restoring Promise unit met resistance: Restorative justice practices were a particularly hard sell initially because they were so unfamiliar to most staff, and officers were reluctant to cede disciplinary power.[316]

As a result, some participants suggested that staff needed greater training in relationship management, communication, and de-escalation techniques.[317] They also suggested that staff may need more education to acknowledge and address common challenges residents face, such as serious mental health issues, trauma, addiction, violence, and victimization.

Many reforms also remain modest in scale and scope, concentrated in a small number of facilities or even units. In practice, this means that only select staff and residents benefit from new policies and practices, while traditional command-and-control-style supervision still holds sway outside the pilot areas. This can cause friction between sites of innovation and the wider facility or agency.[318]

Narratives in Opposition to Reform

People often believe that communities should not "waste money" on those who are being punished. It is true that tracking the monetary cost-versus-benefit of relatively novel programs and initiatives such as the ones described in this report can be tricky. It is easy to see up-front spending on new facilities or program managers; less visible are the reduced costs of incarceration and recidivism. It takes many years after a program begins for recidivism statistics to be collected, as people must reach the end of their sentences before a one-, three-, or five-year observation period can start. What is well understood is that the current community costs of incarceration, while nebulous, are high, with some estimates placing economic losses in the trillions of dollars.[319]

A 2025 study estimates that having a loved one incarcerated can cost a family $4,200 annually, for a combined $350 billion nationally. That's a quarter of the annual income of a family living at the poverty line.[320] On the other hand, as many correctional directors have noted, treating incarcerated people with respect and dignity — "treat[ing] them like human beings" — is essentially free.[321] It is not necessary to build a new and costly redesigned prison to accomplish that goal. It may only require the marginal cost of adjusting a training practice or policy, something departments do regularly.

Another major challenge to reform is the entrenched belief, regardless of costs, that people in prison do not deserve humane conditions and that prison is meant to be harsh, onerous, and austere.[322] These beliefs are held by lawmakers, members of the public, and many corrections staff. Several stakeholders expressed the belief that blowback or negative coverage of implemented reforms is inevitable. A former North Dakota official stated, "The headlines [said] we are giving people in prison pizza and popcorn . . . and they put a spin on it that we were treating people too nice."[323] A change agent representative noted that "risk-averse elected officials often just want their DOC to 'stay out of the news.'"[324] Another North Dakota corrections official said that when the DOC started to focus on dynamic security and staff–resident relationships, some officers complained that leadership was trying to turn the facilities into "Disney camp."[325] To counter this narrative, officials stressed the need to share more hard evidence about the positive impact of reforms, as well as encouraging anecdotes, with staff and the public.[326]

While data is not always immediately available about a specific program, broader data can be utilized in the meantime. A meta-analysis of the effectiveness of various Federal Bureau of Prisons programs that aim to reduce recidivism found that even the least effective programming yielded a 12 to 22 percent reduction in recidivism; the most effective programming reduced recidivism by more than 50 percent.[327] Given that the bureau estimates that it costs almost $45,000 to incarcerate a person for a year, these reductions in recidivism represent dramatic cost savings.[328] Michigan's recidivism rate has steadily declined in recent years to just under 23 percent in 2024, the second lowest in state history; the state saves about $49,000 per person per year.[329]

Staffing Shortages

Staffing challenges are at the forefront of leadership concerns in many of the jurisdictions discussed in this report. The effects of the nationwide correctional staffing shortage are undeniable, impacting day-to-day operations and the implementation of new initiatives.[330] According to a former corrections official, now consulting with DOCs in multiple states, "There's no way in hell most of these people are doing reform with 40, 50, 60 percent of their staff. . . .

I've never seen it this bad before."[331] A nonprofit executive who partners with corrections departments described additional, hidden staffing challenges: "Introducing new programs or initiatives — even those run by volunteers or outsiders — requires staff engagement. Depending on the security protocols of the institution, staff may have to accompany volunteers or guests everywhere they go, and in some cases they have to oversee a program or activity. That can require an officer to leave their typical post, and many facilities just don't have staff capacity for that."[332]

Shortages don't just affect whether staff are available to work in a new unit; they affect whether there is time for adequate training in new principles of conduct. Survey research in Maine confirmed that reduced staff capacities have hampered not only culture change efforts but also overall operations and access to programs and resources, compounded by closures during the Covid-19 pandemic.[333] Statewide, 77 percent of staff surveyed said their facility did not have enough personnel to meet its needs, and 71 percent recognized frequent staff turnover as a problem. Beyond hiring and training, increased workloads associated with some of the reforms, such as additional programmatic responsibilities and tighter scheduling, have made people's jobs harder. Several stakeholders described corrections jobs as a perpetual state of crisis management, with so many duties that new initiatives can pose a burden or cause resentment. However, several DOC and technical assistance stakeholders said reforms can alleviate staffing problems by increasing safety and job satisfaction.[334] A former corrections official from Colorado admitted, "We have got to change the way we do business to make this a better place to work. The job we've made is dangerous. We look at the average lifespan of a correctional officer — it's horrible."[335]

Competing Priorities

Correctional leaders and staff in several states acknowledged difficulties in balancing multiple, simultaneous initiatives.[336] Other priorities, whether security concerns or other programming, can easily diminish or derail an initiative's implementation. One correctional leader in South Carolina described the situation as having 14 targets and one dart.[337]

In South Carolina, the Restoring Promise young adult unit competed with other specialized units for resources and staff attention. For example, another unit already had a group of resident leaders who, having established high levels of trust and respect among their peers, functioned as violence interrupters working to de-escalate conflicts.[338] At the same time, the memory of a 2018 riot in the facility looms large, such that the prison emphasized security and restrictive measures over fidelity in implementation of the Restoring Promise approach.[339]

Another challenge is uneven buy-in from correctional unions that fight to ensure fair wages and safer working conditions for staff. Because unions are invested in ensuring that members are safe, they often perceive coercive control and punitive discipline as critical tools. Therefore, several stakeholders cited unions as critical partners in implementing reforms.[340]

Finally, the reality is that culture change can be slow and extremely difficult even when correctional leadership, staff, and incarcerated people are open to it. Reform efforts and multiple initiatives may be stacked on top of each other in a high-stress work environment with limited resources. In states that have invited various technical assistance providers and researchers to work on different initiatives, the external partners may experience a lack of coordination or may be stymied by duplicative efforts.[341] Doing too much too quickly may also lead to change fatigue among staff, appearing as reduced buy-in, exhaustion, and apathy.[342]

Changes in Leadership and Shrinking Budgets

The political landscape changes frequently, creating repeated hurdles for long-term criminal justice reform. Correctional leaders typically serve for three years, so the initiatives they spearhead face uphill battles in long-term implementation.[343] New leaders may come in with a different set of priorities that could displace the reforms currently underway. Frequent turnover may encourage line staff who object to changes in policy and practice to "wait it out, since they know another leader is likely to come in later and shift gears."[344]

Many of the technical assistance providers recommended a few strategies to navigate leadership changes. As one of them put it, "Meet with the new director early to learn about their goals and priorities and listen; walk the director through the work you are doing with an emphasis on how their staff have contributed and owned their participation; show the director how your work furthers and supports their goals and priorities. Find out what their agenda is and show how you're both working toward the same end goal."[345]

Even where leadership changes are not an issue, a change in political priorities may reduce the flow of funds. Faced with budget shortfalls and a gloomy economic outlook, state and federal policymakers may consider cuts to correctional budgets, diverting funds to areas deemed more critical to the community rather than reinvesting in innovative, but nascent, prison practices. A current North Dakota official said that justifying budgets for reform is a huge challenge, as corrections staff and prison populations are not typically top public concerns.[346] Reflecting on relatively recent federal funding decisions, a former government official and a nonprofit leader agreed that the receipt of fewer government dollars may chill innovation, and that many current pilot programs, even if successful, may shut down as federal and philanthropic money dries up.[347]

Additionally, changes in budgets or political priorities can unsettle long-standing relationships with external partners. In Washington State, the DOC has the capacity to fund full-time positions that support policy reform, such as program managers and coordinators across various state prisons for Amend-inspired initiatives.[348] But just next door in Oregon, the DOC was unable to get similar funding from its legislature to support these positions, and statewide adoption of the initiatives developed in partnership with Amend has slowed.[349]

For at least three of the initiatives featured in this report — Restoring Promise, Amend, and Little Scandinavia — reforms depend almost entirely on outside partners who drive planning, training, and implementation; provide research capacity; and offer other resources and support to continue and expand these projects. But additional conversations need to be had about who will fund these types of initiatives in the future — and at a larger scale.

Achieving Holistic Safety

>> In 2022, the organizations Chicago Beyond, One Voice United, and JustLeadershipUSA partnered to publish *Do I Have the Right to Feel Safe?*, a new vision for correctional practices rooted in "holistic safety."[350] Its authors outline how it is possible to limit the reach of trauma and violence while still prioritizing the safety of everyone touched by the criminal justice system, including incarcerated people, correctional staff, administrators, and community members.[351] The report aims to help administrators refocus correctional practices away from "chronic control" of physical environments and instead emphasize five core tenets: connectedness, health, personal agency, trust, and value.[352] In 2024, these three organizations announced new partnerships with the Arizona Department of Corrections, Rehabilitation, and Reentry; the Hawaii Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation; and the Vermont Department of Corrections to implement these tenets.[353] In 2025, Chicago Beyond released a report assessing the impact of this holistic safety initiative to date. The initiative has already achieved early wins, which include elevating the voices of frontline staff and incarcerated people, introducing more humane visitation policies, improving recreation opportunities, and reducing the use of isolation.[354]

Founded in 2016, Chicago Beyond amplifies community-backed solutions to provide the support and opportunities people need to succeed.[355] Although the organization is concerned with a wide array of national initiatives and strategic investments, it has been particularly notable in corrections.[356] For example, the Cook County Jail, with the help of Chicago Beyond's managing director of justice initiatives, Nneka Jones Tapia, implemented a first-of-its-kind family visitation pilot. The initiative focuses on father–child relationships and works to remove physical, mental, and emotional barriers associated with traditional jail visits.[357] Chicago Beyond also funds and provides technical assistance for its Holistic Safety Action Alliance, a multistate prison reform initiative that brings together correctional leaders, formerly incarcerated individuals, and criminal justice advocates to develop trauma-informed strategies that reduce physical and emotional isolation in jails. After Robert Brooks, an incarcerated individual in a New York State prison, died at the hands of correctional officers, New York Gov. Kathy Hochul recommended, in December 2024, a partnership with Chicago Beyond "to conduct a safety gap analysis . . . with the goal of deploying fresh, expert eyes . . . to identify improvements and develop best practices."[358]

One Voice United is a national organization founded by former correctional officer and labor leader Andy Potter. It brings together correctional staff, legislators, academics, and reform advocates to discuss practical improvements in correctional systems that will bring lasting change.[359] Among its efforts: uniting the perspectives of correctional officers and incarcerated people and partnering with Families Against Mandatory Minimums and Arnold Ventures on the Safer Prisons, Safer Communities campaign to improve safety in overcrowded and understaffed prisons.[360] The group's Correctional Officer Wellness Project works to improve the physical and mental health of correctional officers, facilitates training for correctional staff committed to innovative reform, and elevates the voices of correctional officers to establish them as experts in the field.[361]

JustLeadershipUSA was founded in 2014 by criminal justice advocate Glenn Martin. The organization provides resources and training to people who, like Martin, have been directly impacted by the criminal justice system so that they are empowered to lead reform efforts and build thriving communities.[362] For example, Leading with Conviction is a yearlong training program that introduces participants to successful regional criminal justice advocacy efforts, and the recently established JustUS Coordinating Council creates and recommends policy reforms at the federal, state, and local levels.

It is in this context that a thorough cost–benefit analysis of current reforms may be helpful in making the financial case for continuing these approaches. Combined with anecdotal and qualitative evidence and stakeholder reports from the field, such analysis can demonstrate that it would be penny-wise and pound-foolish to withdraw funding for these programs and initiatives.[363]

Successful Strategies for Sustainability and Expansion

Despite the many barriers to reform, the array of innovative prison reform activities in the United States is remarkable, especially given the current political climate, in which crime is increasingly used as a wedge issue.[364] Even more impressive is that many initiatives are expanding. When asked to account for their programs' successes, stakeholders shared four key strategies.

Identify Champions

Across the jurisdictions we surveyed, stakeholders highlighted the roles of champions willing to embrace new ideas and policies and encourage others to adopt them. For corrections staff and legislators alike, those with experience in law enforcement or military leadership proved to be especially credible messengers able to engender trust.[365] People surveyed said that the most effective champions had a clear commitment to changing prison culture and operations to be more supportive of residents and staff. One Maine official said that commissioners and directors had to be bold and willing to take risks, but also curious and open — ready to educate themselves, work with others, and identify what is (and is not) working.[366]

Broad-based culture change in corrections also requires a leadership pipeline. Several stakeholders said that their corrections departments succeeded because they could identify and develop experienced, like-minded leaders in central administration and across facilities.[367] One national technical assistance provider outlined this strategy further: "One of the things we've really tried to do is zero in on people who are at the beginning of their leadership careers. . . . These people can start thinking about how they can make a positive impact earlier on and have a longer runway to build things out."[368] A nonprofit leader added that "peer effects in corrections are huge — I've seen them work wonders at all levels, from DOC commissioners down to line security staff. Getting project champions on board can move an incremental reform agenda forward quickly."[369]

Engage Internal Stakeholders

Reforms cannot succeed without buy-in from both correctional officers and incarcerated people. A former corrections official now consulting across states noted that one effective strategy is to establish a "shared language" and "identify shared benefits . . . between staff and incarcerated folks."[370] His partner added, "When we talk about health and safety, we're trying to make clear this is not about the health and safety of just the staff and it's not about the health and safety of just the incarcerated population. It's about everybody's health and safety. And so we're trying to emphasize that everyone's fate is linked or shared."[371]

Corrections staff in Maine confirmed that ongoing conversations between correctional leadership and staff were critical to the broad acceptance of recent reforms.[372] According to an official in North Dakota, "I would spend a lot of time going to shift briefings and just communicating to staff and just talking about the changes that we're making, why we're making them."[373]

A strategy to defuse potential pushback from staff is to integrate reforms with developmental opportunities for frontline workers.[374] A technical assistance provider reminded the team that "[we] ask COs to take a big leap of faith by trying something new. We build trust by sticking with them when there is a challenge, problem-solving, providing resources, and advocating for them with leadership."[375] A Restoring Promise representative commented, "We have heard from COs that this is the first time they've been allowed or empowered to have input."[376]

An Arizona corrections official further stressed that staff trainings need to evolve alongside changes in the corrections field. This official also emphasized the need to include personal health, wellness, and resource support for corrections staff, describing the staff as "eager to learn, practice, and improve. We just need to provide them with the opportunity to do so."[377]

It is also critical to hear from incarcerated people when devising corrections reforms, including those from specific subgroups, so that both general and specific needs can be addressed.[378] In the Maine prison system, for example, resident civic engagement groups — such as the NAACP chapter in the state's maximum security prison; each facility's Resident Advisory Council, composed of both staff and residents; and the Long Timers Group, which offers support for long-serving residents — played an important role in helping correctional leaders and the public understand the problems in their facilities.[379] They were uniquely able to speak about issues that residents cared about, such as racial marginalization, the experiences of veterans, and the effects of solitary confinement. And being able to take these issues to state legislators and the media garnered them credibility with residents and administration.

Similarly, when working with the Urban Institute's Prison Research and Innovation Network, a Missouri

correctional leader recalled how "innovation advisers," or groups of staff and residents working together, helped the DOC measure the institution's culture and climate and identify priorities for innovation.

Use Data and Communication to Build Support

There was consensus among participants that high-quality data analysis can enhance public and private support for reform while preempting potential opposition. The data and research discussed in this report show immediate improvements in facility safety and quality of life for people who live and work in prisons. And although outcome data is not yet fully developed for many programs in this report, early numbers suggest promising reductions in recidivism, connecting what happens inside prisons with broader public safety goals.

Data can also help reframe the debate away from traditional narratives of being hard versus soft on crime, showing how reforms enhance safety while saving money. A former North Dakota corrections official noted that legislatures and the public crave facts and metrics.[380] The official suggested developing messaging telling these stakeholders to "invest your money in things that work because you're going to pay for it somewhere. We actually try to quantify . . . the long-term economic impacts that you have for their family members . . . and all the other harmful effects."[381] To establish political and fiscal value for skeptical decision-makers, leaders will need to confront the realities and high costs of incarceration head-on.

Other leaders suggested tracking outcomes that are strongly correlated to recidivism reduction, as well as reentry statistics, as early proof that their programs work.[382] For example, one Maine leader highlighted that corrections data shows successful completion rates in postsecondary education, advanced graduate study, and vocational training and certification among residents. Similarly, a Vocational Village correctional leader noted improved job placement and employment among people returning to the community after participating in that program.[383]

Prison Research and Innovation Initiative and Developments in Missouri

>> In 2019, with philanthropic support from Arnold Ventures, the Urban Institute — an independent policy research institution — launched the Prison Research and Innovation Initiative, a six-year project to improve conditions for the 1.3 million incarcerated people and the 200,000 corrections staff in U.S. prisons.[384] Researchers spent four years studying existing prison conditions so they could identify opportunities for improvement. They then launched the Prison Research and Innovation Network (PRIN) with Colorado, Delaware, Iowa, Missouri, and Vermont, pairing each state with a researcher as well as advisers selected from among local corrections staff and incarcerated people to implement opportunities that research revealed.[385]

While the initiative has concluded, it left a legacy of multisite reforms with a growing research base and a model of engagement among both corrections staff and incarcerated people, with reforms in Missouri as a leading example.[386] Despite the interruption of the pandemic in 2020, the staff and resident advisory committee at Missouri's Moberly Correctional Center implemented opportunities for residents to grow food and for the DOC to improve visitation options.[387] These changes were made with advice from PRIN and in consultation with leadership from the governor's and attorney general's offices, DOC leadership, and legislative representatives.[388] Other proposed changes included creating space for staff to decompress and recenter themselves after stressful incidents, and more normalized facilities for residents.[389] The reforms have been so popular with residents and staff that after the end of the partnership with PRIN, the state offered all institutions the opportunity to participate in the initiative, now known as the Missouri Innovation Network.[390]

As a direct outgrowth of this work, Arnold Ventures is now funding the Missouri Prison Transformation Project, a randomized control trial that aims to improve conditions for staff and residents at four Missouri prisons across seven wings, four female and three male.[391] Like other programs mentioned in this report, the project is organized around normalization and dynamic security, as well as humanistic psychology, which places an emphasis on empathy, the whole person, and individuality.[392]

The Missouri DOC is currently partnering with Amend to train staff on the international best practices also mentioned in this report.[393] As a first step, staff traveled to Washington State and Oregon to be trained in Amend's Ambassadors program. During the second phase of the project, these staff members will share their new knowledge with others at home. This learning and teaching cycle helps create long-term sustainability and flexibility when propagating new programs.

To further garner lawmakers' support, it may also be effective to deploy polling data indicating that while people across the political spectrum see punishment and public safety as prison's core purposes, they also support improved prison conditions. Brennan Center polling found that a vast majority of voters believe that prisons should be free from violence, treat people humanely and fairly, and provide treatment and programs for incarcerated people.[394]

Corrections officials are also a key audience, as staff will want to see proof that programs deliver on their promises. A North Dakota corrections official said that when they started to focus on dynamic security and positive behavior reports, they ran into resistance from staff.[395] This is not surprising; staff had been trained in a security-and-control mindset and may have had entrenched beliefs that this was the only way to be safe. Introducing any ambiguity into their roles could have made them feel less safe.[396] However, leadership was able to secure staff buy-in by presenting data that showed the changes led to decreased violence in facilities.[397] Restoring Promise technical assistance providers agreed with this approach, noting, "The data on prison reform and benefits for staff is growing. . . . [You can] cultivate a connection and alliance based on that shared goal — no one can deny the need for healthy, safe staff."[398]

Data and research could also indicate unexpected or undesired results, but this too could be an opportunity. Corrections officials noted that if data shows policies don't work, that data should be used to change course.[399]

Create a National Learning Community in Corrections

Examples of how facilities or jurisdictions have successfully implemented alternative approaches to prison management may provide sufficient proof or political cover for other entities looking to adopt similar reforms in the face of opposition. Amend, the Restoring Promise initiative, the Correctional Leaders Association, Prison Fellowship, and the Urban Institute's Prison Research and Innovation Initiative, among other leaders in the field, all report sustained development through information sharing, experiential learning and study trips between jurisdictions, networking efforts, and direct collaboration.[400] And facilities in Maine, Michigan, and North Dakota, as well as Pennsylvania's Little Scandinavia unit, were cited as popular locations for other corrections departments to visit and learn from. One former corrections official in Colorado said, "I invited anyone that wanted to come take a look . . . even those that disagreed with our reforms. Once they saw what was occurring in a positive manner, we didn't have to lecture them."[401] These exchanges also provide potential advocates opportunities to shape and share their own experiences and narratives beyond cold data.

Examples worth modeling include the following:

- In 1976, Charles Colson, a former White House counsel who was incarcerated for Watergate-related crimes, founded Prison Fellowship, an organization dedicated to improving the lives of those impacted by incarceration. One of the group's programs, Warden Exchange, works with prison wardens across the country who have the potential to positively influence the culture of the prisons they work in. To date, Warden Exchange has helped 820 wardens develop the skills and competencies necessary to become transformational leaders.[402] The program begins with a six-month online phase in which participants assess their strengths and weaknesses with a series of tests. Next, wardens are invited in cohorts of 30 to enter the plan development phase, in which they participate in residencies and build out three-year transformation plans. Finally, technical assistance providers work with the wardens to evaluate their plans and develop assessments tied to the culture of their prisons. One way this is bearing fruit is in North Dakota's positive writeups policy, which flips the script on infraction reports and lets incarcerated people and staff give each other writeups for positive engagements.[403]

- In 2015, the Correctional Leaders Association formed a staff wellness committee that is currently chaired by Laurel R. Harry of the Pennsylvania DOC. Committee members include directors, commissioners, and secretaries of corrections agencies. The committee meets bimonthly to develop best practices that support both staff and incarcerated individuals. It also maintains a clearinghouse of resources, shares suggestions through a mailing list, and supports site visits in the United States and a range of foreign countries, including Ireland, Germany, Norway, Singapore, and Sweden, to reimagine the practice of corrections. The association supports DOC leaders in developing wellness initiatives that improve hiring, retention, and training. It also collaborates with other associations, agencies, and technical assistance providers to explore evidence-based practices that support staff and resident well-being.

- Since 2023, For the People, an organization that brings prosecutors to prisons "to see incarceration up close: the conditions, the rehabilitative programs, and the people behind the case files," has hosted convenings for up to nine prosecutors' offices. These programs take place at both the Central California Women's Facility and the San Quentin Rehabilitation Center and are intended to raise awareness among prosecutors of what conditions are like inside prisons. While visiting prisons, prosecutors meet with wardens, officers, and other correctional staff to learn about challenges in prison administration and opportunities for greater cross-agency communication.[404]

Conclusion

Nearly 40 years ago, Justice William Brennan observed, "Prisoners are persons whom most of us would rather not think about. Banished from everyday sight, they exist in a shadow world that only dimly enters our awareness."[405] In the intervening years, prisons have remained a shadow world — an enduring feature of the American criminal justice landscape that is largely removed from public view despite touching millions of lives.

Our out-of-sight, out-of-mind approach to people in prison has created a system in which, contrary to the purported ideals of reflection and rehabilitation, people return to society less equipped to participate in healthy community life than they were when they left it. The inevitable result is persistently high recidivism rates coupled with ballooning fiscal costs as people are reincarcerated in an endless, wasteful cycle that tears apart families and communities. Meanwhile, corrections staff carry the trauma of their jobs home to manifest in elevated rates of depression, substance use, and even suicide.

Ultimately, neither neglectful nor willful ignorance can justify the failure of an institution so central to the U.S. system of justice. If the country is committed to accountability with rehabilitation, then it must ensure that prisons can deliver that outcome through improved conditions, training for residents and staff, and support for positive change. This report brings to light numerous examples of prisons across the country, in conservative and liberal states, that have begun to help people reshape the course of their lives. Their programs and policies teach accountability and restorative justice, provide education and vocational training, support recovery from substance use disorders, offer counseling for mental health issues, and provide people with tools they need to avoid returning to prison. Separately or in collaboration, initiatives such as Restoring Promise and Amend, along with state departments of corrections, are developing practical solutions that make communities safer and ameliorate the conditions in prison that harm residents and staff.

Unless we do something to lower recidivism rates, around 320,000 of the approximately 450,000 people released from prison in 2022 will be rearrested by 2027. Among them, 180,000 will return to prison.[406] Rather than thinking incarcerated people are already "lost," the programs and initiatives in this report treat prison life as an opportunity to positively shape the way people will live post-release.

We asked earlier: If prison environments, management, and culture are more focused on rehabilitation than retribution, will they lead to personal growth among incarcerated people and yield safer prisons and better post-release outcomes? The early results of these programs suggest that they will.

Appendix: Methodology

This study is descriptive in nature. Brennan Center researchers conducted activities to answer two primary research questions:

1) What are some of the most notable efforts states are undertaking to change prison conditions in order to reduce violence, improve post-release outcomes, and enhance public safety?

2) How can corrections agencies successfully sustain, replicate, or scale up these programs, initiatives, or reforms to benefit more staff and incarcerated residents?

Data Sources

Researchers relied on three modes of data collection: (1) site visits in 10 states; (2) interviews and meetings with 71 stakeholders responsible for reforms; and (3) secondary analysis of available data from corrections departments or technical assistance providers, program materials, and desk research (review of public materials).

Separately, Brennan Center researchers partnered with the Maine DOC to understand staff and resident perceptions of prison culture following reforms the agency had undertaken in 2021. Researchers collected survey data from corrections and program staff and incarcerated people in multiple facilities in 2024 and 2025. This data is used only in the report's discussion about Maine.

Site Visits

Between March 2023 and October 2024, Brennan Center researchers made 12 site visits, primarily traveling to multiple prisons in 10 states: Connecticut, Florida, Indiana, Maine, Michigan, North Dakota, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Washington. The Brennan Center team also made two trips, one to see facilities in Norway, hosted by the technical assistance provider Amend, and another to Germany, hosted by the Vera Institute of Justice's Restoring Promise initiative, a technical assistance provider.[407] Researchers gathered and documented data about programs and initiatives through direct observation of prison grounds, facilities, and specific housing units within those facilities and through discussion with correctional leaders, staff, and residents. Whenever available, the team reviewed data and reports by external researchers studying the implementation and outcomes of targeted programs to improve prison conditions.

Interviews and Meetings

From May 2024 to September 2025, Brennan Center staff conducted 18 fact-finding interviews and meetings and corresponded with 38 stakeholders responsible for conceiving or implementing some programs and initiatives discussed in this report. These engagements were conducted mostly in 14 states: Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Idaho, Indiana, Maine, Michigan, Missouri, North Dakota, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Washington.[408] The goal of these interviews and meetings was to hear how people responsible for reforms perceived the current state of their work, including any successes and challenges they faced in implementation. Researchers also asked participants how they were able to overcome identified challenges and what recommendations they had for agencies interested in similar reforms. These stakeholders included current and former correctional leaders and key staff, technical assistance providers, researchers, and system-impacted advocates for prison reforms. In addition, approximately 33 staff members at Maine State Prison participated in meetings with Brennan Center researchers discussing their experiences and recommendations for Maine reforms in 2024.

Program Materials, Corrections Data, and Desk Research

Brennan Center researchers reviewed documents (such as training materials and agency protocols) and administrative data, where available.[409] Technical assistance providers shared internal reports and memoranda, journal articles, and unpublished program documents (such as unit protocols, training materials, or progress reports). Some technical assistance providers also supplied their own analyses of data they had collected about prison culture on units.[410]

Surveys with Maine Staff and Incarcerated People

To better inform this paper's reporting on Maine's recent efforts to change its prison practices, Brennan Center staff conducted original mixed-methods research with approval from the Maine DOC. To begin, researchers developed and disseminated prison culture surveys. One survey targeted corrections and program staff (such as health-care and educational providers), and a second survey targeted incarcerated people.[411] The surveys were intended to examine staff's and residents' perceptions about recent changes to prison policy and practice. The resident surveys were administered in person and designed to provide a baseline snapshot of prison culture in the two largest state facilities: Maine State Prison and Maine Correctional Center, including the Women's Center. Together, these facilities

hold 65 percent of the state prison population. Because the staff survey could be administered online, the research team could establish a baseline for staff statewide and in the three facilities listed above.

In total, researchers collected 117 staff survey responses and 350 incarcerated resident survey responses. Surveys were administered during two periods:

- In October 2024, researchers launched the first wave of resident surveys in person at Maine State Prison. Over three days, residents from a range of housing units completed 204 surveys (26 percent of the facility's population). Concurrently, researchers sent online surveys to Maine DOC staff in all facilities. Staff members across the state completed 117 surveys (approximately 13 percent of Maine DOC facility staff).

- In March 2025, Brennan Center researchers completed the first wave of surveys for incarcerated people at Maine Correctional Center, including the Women's Center. At this collection, 146 incarcerated residents completed surveys, including 56 women (27 percent of the facility's population and 54 percent of the Women's Center population).

Limitations

Researchers concentrated their efforts on sites that were willing to participate and that correctional leaders, technical assistance providers, and advocates had recommended. Research activities were limited to the collection period from March 2023 to September 2025. Although many programs and initiatives covered in this report are wide-ranging, they do not represent every notable prison reform effort in the United States. In addition, Brennan Center surveys were limited to a convenience sample of Maine corrections staff and incarcerated people willing to participate during the survey data collection periods in October 2024 and March 2025. Surveys do not represent all corrections staff's and residents' views.

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409 All documents on file with the authors: Brennan Center interview, Arizona Department of Corrections, Rehabilitation, and Reentry; Brennan Center interview, former Colorado Department of Corrections official; Brennan Center interview, Maine Department of Corrections; Brennan Center interview, Michigan Department of Corrections; Brennan Center interview, Missouri Department of Corrections; Brennan Center interview, North Dakota Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation; Brennan Center interview, former North Dakota Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation official; Brennan Center interview, Pennsylvania Department of Corrections; Brennan Center interview, former Washington State Department of Corrections official; Brennan Center correspondence, Arizona Department of Corrections, Rehabilitation, and Reentry; Brennan Center correspondence, Maine Department of Corrections; Brennan Center correspondence, Michigan Department of Corrections; Brennan Center correspondence, former North Dakota Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation official; nonpublic data, Maine Department of Corrections; nonpublic training document, Maine Department of Corrections; nonpublic memorandum of understanding, Michigan Department of Corrections.

410 All documents on file with the authors: Brennan Center interview, Amend; Brennan Center interview, correctional consultant; Brennan Center interview, Institute for Municipal and Regional Policy at the University of Connecticut; Brennan Center interview, Little Scandinavia researchers; Brennan Center interview, Maine prison

advocates; Brennan Center interview, Prison Fellowship; Brennan Center interview, Last Mile; Brennan Center interview, University of Missouri researcher; Brennan Center interview, Vera Institute of Justice researchers; Brennan Center correspondence, Amend; Brennan Center correspondence, For the People; Brennan Center correspondence, nonprofit leader in corrections; Brennan Center correspondence, Last Mile; Brennan Center correspondence, Vera Institute of Justice researchers; nonpublic memorandum, Arnold Ventures; nonpublic data, Vera Institute of Justice; nonpublic program manual, Vera Institute of Justice.

411 Brennan Center, Study of the Maine Department of Corrections.

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