

The New York Unity Project is a youth-led think tank dedicated to reducing political division and growing unity in the United States. We research causes of division, host discussions, and propose solutions to strengthen America's democracy and mutual understanding.

Policy Brief: Reducing Recidivism Through Targeted Education and Workforce Programs

Executive Summary: Approximately 62% to 68% of state prisoners are rearrested within three years of release, indicating the failure of the prison system to produce effective rehabilitation. Upon release, inmates lack sufficient support from the government and struggle to survive economically. This is largely caused by a prison system that is set up to punish rather than rehabilitate. Over the last 50 years, American politicians have leaned into the “tough on crime” rhetoric, creating a toxic prison system which spends around 445 billion every year. Other countries - such as Norway (50% drop in recidivism) - have seen success in a progressive system that focuses on reform over punishment. A study by the National Bureau of Economic Research showed that for previously unemployed inmates, job training programs led to a +40 percentage point increase in employment after release. Evenmore, prison education significantly reduces recidivism and boosts employment, with participants being up to 48% less likely to reincarcerate and 13% more likely to find work. The first step towards creating success in the outside world is to stimulate it beforehand.

Policy suggestion: Mandatory Pre-Release Workforce & Education Track

- All inmates within 24–36 months of release are enrolled in:
 - Vocational training (specialized education focused on teaching practical, hands-on skills required for specific trades, occupations, or careers) OR academic program
 - While participation is mandatory, allow inmates to opt out of the program if they talk with a correctional officer and demonstrate equivalent post-release employment or education placement.
- Programs delivered via partnerships with:
 - Community colleges
 - Private employers
- Participants receive wages:
 - Portion saved for reentry
 - Portion allocated to restitution
- Expand public-private partnerships to create employment pathways for those in prison
 - Create a Work Opportunity Tax Credit for employers who hire those in prison within the past 24 months
 - Increase government outreach to small businesses and sectors struggling to find employment, and offer to customize job training practices in exchange for employment opportunities

Implementation Body:

- Federal Bureau of Prisons + state corrections

Target Population:

- Non-violent + medium-risk inmates

Risks:

- Political resistance from those who are “tough on crime” and see this as overly lenient
- Issues in equal implementation of education and employment opportunities among all prisoners
- Mistrust of employers in hiring those from prison

Cost and impact: From an economic standpoint, prisons provide substantial financial benefits, [saving taxpayers 4 to 5 dollars for every 1 dollar invested in correctional education](#). An expansion of these programs would encompass around 250,000 inmates annually, with a cost of around 4,000 dollars per prisoner leading to a budget increase in the range of 1.1 billion dollars. However, this cost will be offset by a decrease in prison population. Assuming around a 20-25% decrease in re-incarceration, this would mean a deduction of about 35,000 new prisoners per year. Currently the government invests [a median of 60,000 dollars](#) per prisoner, so this would mean savings of over 2 billion dollars. Additional fiscal gains from increased employment and reduced system burden are not fully captured in this estimate, and this doesn't quantify the mental benefit prisoners receive from educational stimulation - decreasing the 22 hours many inmates spend in their cells.

Conclusion: This will set an important precedent for prison reform legislation and will form the first step towards the expansion of the United States prison model towards one that prioritizes rehabilitation. While the United States of America may not be able to replicate the individual focus that is put into prisoners in more progressive systems, what can be done at scale is to implement education and job support programs. It is key to note that this is only the first

step in reforms needed. There are an array of improvements that must be made ranging from prison quality to prison guard training.

The United States of America has nearly 2 million people held in jails and prisons, representing roughly 16% of the world's incarcerated population despite having less than 5% of its total population. According to the most recent comprehensive data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) and the Council on Criminal Justice:

- Approximately 62% to 68% of state prisoners are rearrested within three years of release.
- Approximately 27% to 39% of released prisoners return to prison within three years.

An article by Vera Institute states that each year spent in prison comes with a two year decline in life expectancy and data from the Bureau of Justice Statistic found that, in 2011, 44 percent of people who are incarcerated had a mental health disorder. Evenmore, according to USA Facts, Median state spending was \$60,989 per prisoner for the year 2023, with the Prison Policy Initiative, estimating the country to spend around 445 billion every year on the prison system to lock up around .06 of the American population. It is clear that the prison system needs reform.

95% of all prisoners in America will be released back into society at some point. In a successful system, that 95% who enter prison as a convicted felon, should be ready to reenter society and succeed. Currently, prisoners are held for too long, facing horrible conditions while in jail, and upon release they are set up poorly with minimal future prospects. If prison only serves as a place to carry out punishment, then those millions who reenter society will leave a toxic environment that sets them up to recommit crime and end up in the same place they come from. A reinvented system which aims towards creating positive change can completely alter the trajectory of its inmates and save the government millions by reducing recidivism rates.

Imagine a new system in which prison becomes a place of growth, guards serve not as punishers but support figures to help foster development. Prisoners do not spend 20 hours a day in their cell, and can instead go out to the yard more than 2 times a week. Education is not rare, food quality is not horrible, and most importantly those in prison leave ready to go make their mark on the world.

According to the UCSF Magazine, in the 1990s, Norway had a recidivism rate around 70%, whereas now they sport one of the world's lowest rates at 20%. For those unfamiliar, the definition of recidivism is the tendency of a convicted criminal to reoffend. It is a key term in the justice world because of how crucial a statistic it provides when considering the ability of the justice system to create reform. In the Norwegian justice system, the max sentence is 21 years for most civilian crimes while the most severe crimes can reach a 30 year maximum, however it is considered one of the safest countries in the world. Norway's prison population rate is approximately 49–54 per 100,000 inhabitants. In stark contrast, the United States has an incarceration rate around 639–707 per 100,000, which is roughly 10 to 13 times higher. While

you can attribute this difference to many external factors, it is significant that the country which has the highest quality of prisons and the most lenient conditions also has the lowest recidivism rate and one of the lowest crime rates. In Norway, prisons focus on “normalization”, meaning they attempt to replicate the outside life as closely as possible. The guards in these prisons serve as mentors, and they walk around without carrying weapons, yet escape attempts and violence are extremely rare. The system is built around training, education, and therapy to prepare inmates for successful re-entry into society. Instead of massive cell blocks, inmates live in small "pod" communities to create a more humane and positive environment. Each prisoner lives with a TV in their cell, and some even have individual bathrooms. In the Bastoy prison which is described in a [Guardian](#) article, prisoners earn £6 a day and are given a food allowance each month to buy ingredients for their self-prepared breakfasts and evening meals from the island's mini-supermarket. Even in the most high security prisons, education is an expectation, and many participate in job training and labor that sets them up to have skills which will translate to the outside world. An example is the Halden prison in which prisoners have a garage where they are trained to become car mechanics and leave with the skills to be successful in life. This creates a lifestyle in which prisoners leave their cells in the morning and don't return all day, spending their days being productive and self-improving. This is a massive contrast to America in which idle time is the norm. Prisoners rarely leave their cells, and when they do they have extremely structured days where they are vigilantly looked after. The progressive and communal vibe found in Norway is the complete opposite of the US where prisons are often the home of toxic environments and filled with corruption and violence.

However, the reality is that Norway has a prison population under 5,000 while the US houses hundreds of thousands of prisoners. Giving individual prisoners the attention and

resources received in Norway is unrealistic, however what can be replicated are the methods of rehabilitation used. Since the Cold War era, America has emphasized a strict punishment system and harsh methods of punishment for crimes. There is a constant fear of the rise of crime, and politicians constantly campaign on platforms of law and order with the goal of creating safer communities. Those who try to take more liberal stances on policing and crime are often targeted in campaigns as potentially weak. For any major changes to happen to the prison system a change in mindset must be had. Instead of viewing prison as a place of punishment, the idea of reform and growth must be prioritized. This can be done not only by realizing that this will end up preventing more crime in the long run, but also from a financial standpoint, less prisoners will equate to less money spent on a huge justice system which takes billions of tax payer dollars every year.

One could go in depth to the flaws of the prison system and write numerous reports on the changes that need to be made, but the most obvious and potentially effective one is to increase job training, employment, and education opportunities that prisoners receive. Some meaningful statistics to show the effectiveness of these programs are:

- A RAND Corporation report showed that individuals who participate in any type of educational program while in prison are 43 percent less likely to return
- A Spring Nature study found that:
 - Vocational training (hands-on education pathway focused on providing practical skills and technical knowledge for specific trades or careers): ~\$3.05 return per \$1 spent, College programs: ~\$16,908 benefit per participant, and that these

- A study by the National Bureau of Economic Research showed that for previously unemployed inmates, job training programs led to a +40 percentage point increase in employment after release

The value of providing prisoners with education and employment resources is clear. Not only do these programs instill important traits and values within those participating, but also if prisons truly want to serve as a place for rehabilitation, part of that process needs to be preparing inmates for a successful life outside prison. The amount of stagnant time prisoners undergo is detrimental to their personal development, and the idea that the current system encourages positive personal growth and development is not true. Humans are a result of their environment, and in many prisons the environment encourages violence and toxicity. The goal is primarily to punish rather than to foster growth and that is the key difference between America and Norway. Taking away one's liberties is a punishment in itself, and to suggest that more punishment must be carried out on top of that is a mistake. It is more beneficial to society to have those prisoners return to society ready to work hard and succeed rather than to continue to commit crime. The difference in spending per prisoner is not major between the US and Norway, it is just rather the mindset behind what the goal of the prison system should be that must change.

One key difference between the US and Norway, is that prisoners in Norway retain their right to vote while that is taken away here. This is part of the dehumanization that occurs, and giving prisoners the right to vote would incentivize the country to educate them, but also force politicians to spend more time thinking about prisoners who are often ignored in policymaking. There is no reason one's voting rights should be taken away simply because of the crimes they commit.

For job training and employment, inmates should select specified careers, and either start working in prison or take an advanced course on what it takes to succeed in that field. Whatever funds are earned by the prisoner should be placed in a government owned account, and returned to them when they are freed giving them a certain amount of economic stability.

Policy Suggestions

1. Give prisoners the right to vote
2. Reduce time spent in prison cells for prisoners
3. Increase job training opportunities and employment opportunities in prison
4. Open education opportunities to all prisoners

Result of the environment around you

Still not a punishment

While researching this topic, I was shocked when I saw an article from Brookings Institute which stated that the annual salary for a released prisoner is 10,090\$ a year. This pales when compared to the average salary in the US which is in the 60,000 to 70,000\$ range. For reference, smartasset estimates that in the largest U.S. cities, a single adult needs at least \$85,000 to sustain a comfortable lifestyle. The unlivable wage received by these

The U.S. spends:

- ~\$100B+ on incarceration

And a fraction of that on reentry.

GOVERNMENT OWNED JOB NETWORK

Research shows that inmates who participate in correctional education programs have 43 percent lower odds of returning to prison than those who do not, and that every dollar spent on prison education saves four to five dollars on the costs of re-incarceration.[2]

Normalization

Research:

Norway has one of lowest recidivism rates in world at 20%

<https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/winnable2026.html>

- approximately a quarter of people killed by police were in a mental health crisis at the time of the shooting, and suicide is one of the leading causes of death in local jails.
 - Many police officers do not have proper mental health training, the solution is to establish non-police crisis response systems
 - Example : Eugene, Oregon's CAHOOTS program
- Issue: one out of every three people behind bars is being held in a local jail, most for low-level or non-person offenses.
 - Make citations the default

<https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/repeatarrests.html>

- We find that people who are jailed have much higher rates of social, economic, and health problems that cannot and should not be addressed through incarceration.
- *At least* 4.9 million people are arrested and jailed each year, and at least one in 4 of those individuals are booked into jail more than once during the same year. - 930,000 were arrested twice; and 430,000 were arrested three or more times.
 - people with multiple arrests are disproportionately: Black, low-income, less educated, and unemployed.
- Nearly half (49%) of people with multiple arrests in the past year had individual incomes below \$10,000 per year.
- Over half (52%) of people arrested multiple times reported a substance use disorder in the past year
- Even a few days in jail can be especially devastating for people with serious mental health and medical needs, as they are cut off from their medications, support systems, and regular healthcare providers
- For example, in New York City, a study of frequent utilizers found that the 800 people with the most arrests accounted for 18,713 jail admissions and \$129 million in custody and health costs over five years. In Camden, New Jersey, researchers found that 5% of adults accounted for 25% of all arrests over the five-year study period.

How to help people with mental health issues:

For people who must be incarcerated (especially for violent crimes):

- In-jail psychiatric treatment
- Medication continuity
- Reentry planning before release
- Connection to housing + clinics immediately upon exit

TedX video - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j8I749MuYbA>

Injustices in jail

- Dental care = horrible, pulling of teeth
- Bad public defenders, can't commit time to them
- Other countries are different
 - Norway + Finland
 - Principle of normality: set prisons up to be like outside world, no bars on doors, more like dorm room, higher quality, retain civil rights, voting
 - Role of prison guard - contact office, 2-3 inmates personal responsible for, dispel violence with prevention, communication, talk to inmates in a more humane way - never had to use restraint
 - US = ineffective, turns out toxicity

Video 2

- James scared of talking because of years from max security prison
- Education at correctional center
- Education = empowering
- Prison education paradox - Prisons are in darkest corners of society, but have the brightest lights in their classrooms
- Prisons = dehumanizing, education = humanizing
- Extremely small prison rooms, only in yard twice a week
- Prison education shown to be positive
- Prisons = stagnant, “rot behind bars”, but education is transformative
- 1994 Federal crime bill, took away education from millions in cells
- Bureau of Justice Study found that 76.6% of prisoners are rearrested within 5 years, those with education drop that number to 14% with associates degree, 5.6% with a bachelors degree, and 0% with a masters degree
- Study of an Indiana prison found 75% fewer infractions
- Prisons are too isolating
- Voter disenfranchisement for those in prisons, no civil rights and not focused on by government
- 60,000 in solitary confinement, spend 22-24 hours in cell a day
- Teachers learn a ton from teaching in prisons

Video 3 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jNasDy2OqAE>

- In 2019, almost 32000 to house a prison inmate, Louisiana number 1 in the world

- 1963 - JFK decides to provide treatment, make mental health centers, 1981, Reagan lets all patients out to receive treatment but there was no where for them to go
- Many go to jail for 45-90 days for a small offense, and lose many benefits
- When someone enters jail its determined if they qualify for services
- Residential program, live there for a month, 6 months get treatment and enter society
- Train law enforcement

Problem:

- Lack of upward growth for lower class
 - Poor education
- Come out of jail and reenter
 - No experience
 - Bias against them

