

True Justice for All

Annual Report 2024



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A Letter from the Board Chair

Thirty years ago, President Bill Clinton signed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, commonly known as the 1994 Crime Bill. This bill incentivized harsh punishment, lengthy sentences, and prison expansion. It accelerated mass incarceration, devastating communities across the United States.

In its aftermath, we have clear evidence that filling prisons does not fix the nation's problems. In fact, it exacerbates them, disproportionately harming communities of color, separating families, and planting generational seeds of suffering. We have built momentum for reversing some of the most harmful facets of the 1994 Crime Bill and similar "tough-on-crime" legislation.

Across the country, leaders have turned toward evidence-based best practices that uplift instead of punish. Communities are rejecting ineffective policies rooted in fear and vengeance

that keep people locked in cycles of incarceration.

We are making clear progress. At the height of mass incarceration in 2008, 2.3 million people were behind bars. Today, there are fewer than 2 million. Yet, as history shows, strides toward racial equality and fairness have always been met with backlash and retrenchment. Across the country, opponents of justice reform are pushing fear and false narratives to slow our progress.

The presidential election dealt a disappointing blow to our reform agenda. Yet, we are poised to protect our gains and continue the fight.

Not long after I became chair of the Vera Institute of Justice (Vera)'s board in 2020, millions of people took to the streets to protest George Floyd's murder, demanding the transformation of systems that hurt far too many. Vera has kept up this fight for systems that deliver true justice, pushing for successful alternatives to the harms of mass incarceration and showing that there is a better way.

In the pages that follow, you will read about Vera's achievements in its 2024 fiscal year, made during a challenging climate for reform. It is only through the united efforts of many—our partners, colleagues, supporters, and everyone across our community—that we continue to make strides.

As we chart our course for the coming year and beyond, we will redouble our efforts and work to protect our successes and prevent a return to the terrible policies of the past. We have spent decades watching criminalization and incarceration destroy communities of color without building true public safety. And your support is even more critical as we face resurgent headwinds of racism, intolerance, and cruelty.

It has been an honor to serve as board chair of this extraordinary organization and to work alongside such talented and dedicated colleagues toward a shared goal. Together, we have achieved meaningful progress and navigated both challenges and opportunities with resilience and purpose.

I remain deeply committed to Vera's mission and vision as a board member and am confident in the organization's continued success under new leadership.

Thank you for joining us in our commitment to the cause of justice for all.



Damien Dwin
Board Chair

A Letter from the President

Uprooting injustice in the criminal legal and immigration systems is complex, generational work. It requires persistence both when the winds are in our favor and when they are blowing against us.

We made serious progress reforming harmful systems this year, but the results of the 2024 presidential election temper celebration. Voters have selected a president who campaigned on grotesque and demeaning anti-immigrant rhetoric, has stoked fear among the American public, and promised the [largest mass deportation](#) in U.S. history. His early days in office have indicated a sharp turn toward the [“tough-on-crime” policies](#) and loosening of police accountability that were foreshadowed in Project 2025. Real challenges lie ahead for Vera's reform agenda.

The future is uncertain, but our mission remains clear. Vera has spent over 60 years fighting for justice. We will be on the front lines every single day of the Trump presidency to protect the rights of all people and to fight against the harmful policies laid out during his campaign.

Vera is poised to push back against regression. We are scaling up our efforts to defend the rights of immigrants, millions of whom could be facing family separation, detention, and deportation to danger. We are pushing state legislatures to dedicate funding streams for community violence intervention and other non-law enforcement strategies that promote public safety. We are preparing to defeat legislation that targets the discretion of prosecutors who advance needed, evidence-based reforms that decrease prison populations.

We know there exists no straight or quick path to justice. But across the country, there are signs of hope. Because of our united endeavors, more elected officials are embracing

a vision of comprehensive public safety that means more resources are being dedicated to schools, health care, housing, and jobs; more prisons are being transformed into places that allow growth and healing; more immigrant families facing deportation have an attorney to protect their rights; fewer people are awaiting trial behind bars because they can't afford to post bail; more people experiencing crises are being aided by trained mental health professionals instead of arrested—or worse; and more people in prison are earning college degrees they can use to break the cycle of incarceration. Day by day, Vera is proving that the best way to keep our communities safe is to ensure people have the resources they need to thrive.

I offer sincere thanks to Vera's partners, friends, and supporters, whose tireless efforts made a real difference in 2024. We will lean on our values—race equity, respect, independence, collaboration, and commitment—as we push forward.

With your help, we will continue to fight on during these uncertain times. Thank you for being with us. We need you now, more than ever.



Nicholas Turner
President



Our Mission: True Justice for All

The Vera Institute of Justice exists to end the overcriminalization and mass incarceration of people of color, immigrants, and people experiencing poverty.

Justice reform is a multigenerational issue. It involves dismantling deeply embedded systems of inequality and transforming complex institutions. This process is inherently incremental, requiring sustained strategic effort, cultural shifts, legislative change, and the nurturing of new generations of leaders and advocates.

That is exactly what Vera does. We advance policies that reduce mass incarceration, diverting people out of the system, ensuring dignity and opportunity for people living behind bars, and creating pathways to stable reentry for those returning to their communities.

Vera's decades of research show that true public safety doesn't come from locking people up. Yet, there are still more than [1.8 million people](#) in jails and prisons in the United States, including more than 30,000 people in immigration detention. And while that number has declined since its horrific peak in 2008, the United States still puts a [higher percentage](#) of its population behind bars than almost any other country in the world. Every day, Vera fights to decrease these numbers.

This report details Vera's efforts in 2024 to advance progress at the federal level and in statehouses, city halls, court systems, and corrections departments across the country. Our evidence-based alternatives disrupt the harmful status quo and illuminate a better path to public safety.

Here is how we do it →

← Fairness to Freedom rally. Photo by Sergio Mantilla.

Transforming the System at the Front End

To shrink the number of people incarcerated in the United States, Vera works to build strong public safety strategies that prevent people from entering the system in the first place. The United States continues to criminalize [poverty](#), [homelessness](#), [mental illness](#), [substance use](#), and [immigration](#), punishing people who, with assistance, could thrive. Incarceration does not solve these issues but rather [harms](#) people further.

[Public opinion is clear](#): people want a system that is serious about safety and prioritizes solutions that prevent crime from happening in the first place rather than one that responds with punishment in its aftermath.

Redefining what public safety looks like

No more than [7 percent](#) of 911 calls are for situations involving violent crime. Yet, governments default to policing as a primary public safety tool, even though officers are not trained to address the range of health and social needs that prompt emergency calls. Vera's Redefining Public Safety initiative helps governments create and sustain new public safety infrastructure that dispatches civilian crisis responders to help situations that don't require armed police.

In 2024, Vera partnered with the New Orleans Health Department, which developed the [Mobile Crisis Intervention Unit](#), to send licensed mental health professionals, certified peer specialists, and crisis workers to mental health-related 911 calls as an alternative to police. To foster greater transparency and data-informed operations and expansion, Vera guided the development of a public-facing [data dashboard](#) that reports call volumes, dispatch locations, and outcomes.

Every day, police [pull over 50,000 people](#) in the United States, making traffic stops the most common police and civilian interaction. A significant number of these are non-safety-related traffic stops: stops for minor infractions that do not affect road

safety or public safety, such as driving with a single broken taillight, an expired or defective vehicle registration, a missing inspection sticker, or excessive window tint. Such stops do not make communities safer. Instead, they pull people into the criminal legal system, drain public resources, and contribute to racial injustice, as Black drivers are disproportionately pulled over. In 2024, Vera supported places like Denver, Colorado, as they enacted policies to limit non-safety-related traffic stops. As a foundation for this support, Vera created a [suite of tools](#) to assist jurisdictions considering such a policy change.

Pushing back against jail construction and pushing forward on bail reform

Of the staggering roughly [1.8 million](#) people incarcerated in U.S. prisons and jails, about 660,000 are held in local jails. The vast majority of them—about [448,000](#)—are awaiting trial and still considered legally innocent, and most are there simply because they [can't afford to pay bail](#). Vera focuses on decreasing these jail populations. In 2024, Beyond Jails worked with community-based organizations and local government agencies across 10 counties in Kentucky, Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Texas to create county-level strategies to reduce jail incarceration. These included opposing jail expansions and distributing research supporting the development of public defender offices to ensure that everyone has access to attorneys at their first court appearances.

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Vera also continued to advocate for [five pretrial justice bills](#) in Michigan that were introduced in early 2023, where, for example, [38 percent](#) of people with money bail set at or below \$2,500 in Wayne County (which includes Detroit) are forced to remain in jail until the resolution of their cases. This package of bills would expand pretrial justice, reduce poverty-based detention, and promote public safety across Michigan.

Partnering with prosecutors to prioritize people

Prosecutors wield great power in determining who goes to prison and for how long. Vera’s Reshaping Prosecution initiative partners with district attorneys nationwide to provide justice to victims beyond the status quo of convictions and incarceration.

In 2024, Vera helped seven jurisdictions across the nation build or expand diversion programs that tackle the root causes of crime and ultimately build community safety. These innovative programs address substance use disorders and other issues that destabilize communities by offering treatment instead of jail time. Other programs divert people harmed by commercial sexual exploitation away from prosecution and into services that allow them to thrive in their communities. Vera also helped prosecutors in Fort Bend, Texas, and Memphis, Tennessee, embrace data transparency in their communities by hosting data walks outlining racial disparities in prosecution in their jurisdictions and lifting up community research around diversion and other solutions to promote community safety.

Keeping young people out of the system

Girls and gender expansive youth are too often incarcerated for reasons that have little to do with public safety. Instead, child welfare, behavioral health, education, and other child-serving systems often push them into the juvenile legal system in a misguided effort to “protect” them from further harm or force them to comply with services. Many of them have experienced family conflict, abuse,

and housing instability. But, as a [2024 Vera report](#) underscores, confining these young people for their own safety “exposes them to more harm [and] exacerbates the very issues that brought them to court in the first place.” Vera’s Ending Girls’ Incarceration initiative aims to zero out the incarceration of girls and gender expansive youth in the country’s juvenile legal system.

In 2023, Vera launched the End Girls’ Incarceration in California Action Network, which aims to end girls’ incarceration in all 58 counties in California—scaling successful efforts to get to zero in Santa Clara County statewide. The Action Network selected four California counties—Imperial, Los Angeles, Sacramento, and San Diego—to participate in its first cohort. Vera has worked closely with government leadership in each county to assess local drivers of girls’ incarceration and offer recommendations for concrete policy changes.

On the other side of the country in Brooklyn, New York, Vera co-designed and implemented [JustUs](#), a gender-responsive diversion program for girls and gender expansive young people. This program creates individualized, holistic plans to help girls ages 12–18 who are involved or at high risk of involvement with the juvenile legal system. These plans include individual counseling, career readiness workshops, paid internships, and group work.

“So me putting my story into policy work and actually using my story, using my experience to speak out loud to the government officials to try to change the policies on handcuffing youth inside the facilities, when that passed, that gave me so much honor back to myself. It gave me so much dignity back to myself. It gave me power to my voice. . . . That made me feel so uplifted. That made me feel like change is real. It made me all hopeful and possible of things that can really happen.”

—
Teuila, [Freedom and Justice: Ending the Incarceration of Girls and Gender-Expansive Youth in California](#)



↑ Photo courtesy of Jemi.

Jemi's Story

Jemi Brown is a drug court liaison and peer recovery support specialist who works in courts in Oklahoma City. She enjoys working with people who are experiencing the same challenges she did many years ago, providing them with support and assistance. Her clients include many mothers and fathers. "I can tell them, 'I have been exactly where you are at.' I remember sitting at the bottom of that mountain, saying, 'How do I get to the other side?'" she said. "I am light-years away from the person I was."

Because she remembers. In 2018, Brown was pregnant, enduring an abusive relationship, and experiencing addiction and homelessness. She had lost custody of her first child due to a substance use disorder that had developed in the aftermath of a high school injury, for which she had been prescribed copious amounts of painkillers. "My body was telling me I needed this drug," she said. "When the doctors stopped prescribing it, I went and found my fix elsewhere."

At a low moment, Brown was arrested and faced felony drug charges that could have sent her to prison for years. But instead of incarceration, a judge mandated that she enroll in supportive programming with ReMerge Oklahoma. This alternative to incarceration program aims to help mothers stay with their families and communities and provided Brown with drug treatment, employment opportunities, and education. ReMerge assigned her to a team that included a case manager, a therapist, a child reunification program manager, an education and employment coordinator, and a peer recovery support specialist. ReMerge also provided childcare while she took a 12-week coding class. Once she completed it, the program helped her get an internship with a technology company. Brown later returned to school and earned her associate's degree.

Brown's story shows what happens when we prioritize growth and healing instead of punishment and prison. "When I was sick, I was not a good mother," Brown said. "It's better for children to have healthy mothers who can take care of them."

Promoting fairness and dignity for people facing deportation

Each year, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement imprisons hundreds of thousands of immigrants in a shadowy system of jails, prisons, and privately run facilities.

Without legal representation, detained immigrants are very likely to be deported. But with a lawyer, people in immigration detention are up to 10.5 times more likely to obtain relief from deportation than those without representation. Yet, the majority of people in immigration court don't have an attorney to protect their rights because they cannot afford one. In criminal proceedings, the Sixth Amendment guarantees the right to legal representation regardless of a person's ability to pay. But people facing deportation in immigration court are not afforded this same right. In 2024, Vera's Advancing Universal Representation initiative built momentum for the movement to promote fairness in the immigration system by securing representation for people facing deportation. In May, Vera rallied in Washington, DC, with immigrant justice advocates from across the country to support the Fairness to Freedom Act, which would establish a right to representation in immigration proceedings. Simultaneously, Vera has worked to expand publicly funded deportation defense programs at the state level, increasing Safety and Fairness for Everyone (SAFE) Network programs to 31 sites, including Los Angeles, Nashville, and Pittsburgh. Colorado increased deportation defense funding to \$700,000 after Vera's team of researchers advocated for support of immigration legal services. And in New York, Vera led a coalition that successfully lobbied for \$64.2 million in annual funding for immigration legal services, a record level of investment for publicly funded deportation defense programs.

→Photo by NurPhoto via Getty Images.





Saul's Story

"In 2013, a narco-trafficking gang killed my brother. . . . Then they killed my brother-in-law after he sent my sister and niece to the United States for safety. After he was murdered, they threatened me.

I fled through Mexico and crossed the border into the United States near Tijuana to request asylum. For 16 days, I was held in detention. The first week was rough. They wouldn't let us take a bath, and they kept a bright light on 24 hours a day. We didn't have anything to cover ourselves with. When the cold came, we just sat freezing. . . .

Eventually, they released me from detention, but I did not know there was a specific document I needed to fill out to apply for asylum. I didn't know anything about these forms because I didn't have a lawyer. When I had my first court session, the judge asked me if I had completed the paperwork to apply for asylum in the United States. It was really frightening. I worried that if I said something wrong, I would pay the price of being sent back to the place where there were threats to my life. . . .

There should be more legal resources for immigrants, for people in the same situation as me. Many of us are leaving our countries due to danger. Once we arrive in the United States, we are herded into places like animals, with little guidance—not knowing where we are and not knowing the language. . . .

There needs to be more funding for everyone to receive the legal help they need. [The Access to Representation Act](#) is essential because it guarantees immigrants like myself legal representation from lawyers who will fight for our cases and won't charge us thousands of dollars to help us. I want to be on the pathway to being legalized and having a work permit, where I can financially support myself and create a better future for myself here in New York. It is very pretty here. I would like to have a voice and contribute. What I would love to do is to help my family and to know they will be 100 percent okay."

Making change in communities across the country

Vera's place-based initiatives serve the unique purpose of harnessing our strengths and assets to invest locally in dismantling systems that punish and harm and instead building institutions that deliver safety and justice.

Greater Justice New York

Vera's Greater Justice New York initiative fights for the freedom and dignity of people held in New York jails, including New York City's notorious Rikers Island, which is the site of an [ongoing human rights crisis](#). More than [80 percent](#) of the people confined there have not been convicted of a crime and endure horrific conditions waiting for trial. Crumbling infrastructure, staffing deficits, and backlogged courts leave far too many people trapped in dangerous conditions. Vera submitted an [amicus brief](#) in December 2023 supporting calls to install a federal receiver to manage Rikers Island following [dozens of deaths under Mayor Eric Adams](#).

In the legislature, Vera drafted several bills to improve jail conditions and pretrial justice. One bill introduced in the Senate and the Assembly would increase transparency about jail conditions while requiring jails to use national best practices in determining staffing needs. Another bill would create a dedicated office that would work to transition pretrial services from probation to local organizations where people can receive support and treatment in their home communities rather than simply being held in a jail cell.

Vera California

In Los Angeles, Vera California has fiercely advocated for the closure of Men's Central Jail, the dangerous facility where [dozens of Angelenos](#) have died since 2023. Vera has coordinated with organizations, formerly incarcerated people, and families who have lost loved ones in pushing for the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors to follow through on its commitment to close the jail and adopt a "care first, jails last" vision. Vera coordinated multiple day-long trainings for the closure

coalition, met with county officials, and participated in LA County's pretrial services steering committee. Vera staff attended rallies, submitted official testimony, and maintained the [Care First LA data dashboard](#), which collects and publishes under-reported and disparate information on Los Angeles's jails. Vera's dashboard is widely used by local advocates, researchers, and government agencies to monitor Los Angeles's deadly jails and assess system needs.

This year, Vera California also began legislative advocacy in California's Capitol for the first time. Vera opposed and defeated 28 bills, including bills that criminalized homelessness and increased penalties for drug and low-level theft offenses.



↑ Photo by Dania Maxwell / Los Angeles Times via Getty Images.



Vera Louisiana

Louisiana has the second-highest imprisonment rate in the country, with a prison admission rate greater than the national average in 92 percent of parishes and more than twice the national average in 63 percent of parishes. During Louisiana's 2024 Legislative Session, Vera Louisiana advocated for transparency in jails and prisons statewide, helping to pass a bill urging the Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections to publish jail population data on its website. At the local level, the team advised the Orleans Parish Sheriff's Office on several low-barrier ways to fulfill campaign promises regarding data transparency.

Vera Louisiana has also fought for critical investments in services that proactively build public safety. In collaboration with other advocacy organizations, Vera pushed the City of New Orleans to allocate funds to proactively build safe, thriving communities. These investments established an Office of Violence Prevention and a community-based violence intervention and prevention program, supported affordable housing, and created a youth data hub to guide future investments in and supports for youth.

← March outside the Louisiana State Capitol in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Photo by AP Photo/
Gerald Herbert.



Reverend Williams's Story

Reverend Gary Williams advocates for the closure of Men's Central Jail because he knows its harms firsthand. He was in and out of Men's Central in the early 2000s, when he was in the throes of a substance use disorder. To him, it's the last place people experiencing addiction should be sent.

"People go in there feeling bad enough," said Williams. "But while you're in there, you feel less than human. It's a dangerous place. . . . There's no such thing as rehabilitation in Men's Central Jail. It cannot be rebuilt. It cannot be changed. It needs to be torn down. . . . When you get into the dorm, you have a four-man cell, but there could be possibly eight to 10 to even as many as 16 men in a four-man cell with an open toilet. Emotionally, you can't have any kind of peace of mind when you're in a cell with that many people. Then, if you are one of the last ones in, there might not be a bunk for you, so you'd have to sleep on the floor. It really is demoralizing and humiliating."

The humiliation can bleed into violence. Williams said he witnessed deputies smash people's heads against a wall for not immediately complying with an order. He watched fights break out between incarcerated people that the deputies did not seem to care about—similar to a [video](#) published in 2023 showing staff neglecting to intervene in a violent assault for over 10 minutes.

That sort of violence is a natural byproduct of a jail run by deputy gangs and plagued by decrepit conditions, said Williams. "If you allow people to take away who you are, your dignity, your humanity, you become just somebody that's almost invisible," he said. "People feel less than human, and even the bullies—they're doing that because they feel they are oppressed."

Dignity for People Behind Bars

When people enter the system, they are too often warehoused in inhumane conditions, stripped of their humanity, and cut off from pathways to growth and success. By treating people with dignity and expanding access to opportunity in prison, Vera works to improve the quality of life for those experiencing incarceration, reduce the likelihood that people will return to prison, and create safer, stronger communities.

Making prisons safer through restorative justice

Typical conditions of confinement—in local jails, state and federal prisons, and immigration detention facilities—cause harm, leaving people worse off than before and slightly increasing the likelihood that they'll return to prison.

Vera's Restoring Promise initiative has made significant strides in transforming correctional practices to create more humane, dignified environments for incarcerated people and staff. The initiative currently partners with five states—Colorado, Connecticut, Idaho, North Dakota, and South Carolina—to transform existing housing units into places that are grounded in human dignity, accountability, and healing for young adults ages 18 to 25.

Block C of the East Unit at the North Dakota State Penitentiary in Bismarck, for example, doesn't fit the mold of what most prisons in the United States look like. This is evident in its physical design, its programming, and even in its name, chosen by the first group of people who lived there: U.N.I.T.Y. Village, which stands for "Using Natural Integrity for Teaching Youth."

In U.N.I.T.Y. Village, residents spend up to 13 hours a day outside their rooms. Many work within the facility or attend school. Twice a day, in the morning and in the evening, they gather with unit staff for check-ins and check-outs in a lounge filled with couches and yellow, blue, and green ottomans. There's time during these

check-ins to share openly, celebrate accomplishments, and, importantly, address conflict through conversation and dialogue.

The positive results of Vera's work on prison conditions are clear. In 2024, the National Institute of Justice released findings from a randomized control trial conducted in prisons in South Carolina. The findings show that Vera's approach to culture change significantly reduces prison violence and the use of solitary confinement, further strengthening the case for adopting this model as a critical pathway to improving safety and outcomes in corrections.

"Coming to prison is a traumatic experience," said Lacie Zander, a unit manager who oversees U.N.I.T.Y. Village. "Part of wanting people to leave better is making sure that we don't continue to hurt people while we have them."

The findings show that:

Living in a Restoring Promise unit reduced young adults' odds of experiencing a stay in solitary confinement by

83%

Compared to those housed in general population, living in a Restoring Promise unit decreased young adults' odds of receiving a violent infraction by

73%



↑ Photo courtesy of Antonio and Zach.

Antonio and Zach's Story

On Air from a Maximum-Security Prison

Antonio Stridiron and Zach Schmidkunz started recording the Chainz 2 Changed podcast in August 2023 from a converted cell at the North Dakota State Penitentiary, the maximum security prison in Bismark where both men are incarcerated. A large dry-erase board lists episodes planned for the podcast's first season and ideas for upcoming interviews. Schmidkunz has scribbled a quote on the board: "Is what we are doing today making the world a better place??"

The hosts—and staff at the North Dakota Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation—view the podcast as an opportunity to change public perceptions of people in prison.

"A lot of people don't think that, when people come to prison, that they change," said Stridiron. "People do try to change. There are people who learn from their mistakes and try to do better. They are remorseful, and they want to give back."

Schmidkunz and Stridiron hope that sharing the stories of people in prison will encourage society to remove the barriers that people leaving prison face. Approximately 95 percent of people in state and federal prisons will someday leave and return to their communities, where they often confront challenges securing safe, stable housing and employment.

They lay this out in their first episode, when Schmidkunz says to Stridiron, "Let's work on getting rid of the stereotype that we are only what we did. We're actually people trying to change our lives. Because, let's face it, most of us in prison are gonna be out soon. . . . We're gonna be everybody's neighbors."

"And what type of neighbor would you like to have?" Stridiron responds. "Someone who's angry, stressed out, frustrated, felt deserted, felt cast aside? Or someone who is more happy, with a new perception on life?"

College courses in prison help break the cycle of incarceration

Education is one of the best tools for breaking the cycle of incarceration—benefiting not only those participating in college in prison but communities at large—and Vera’s Unlocking Potential initiative is working to ensure that people in prison have access to high-quality postsecondary education. In [July 2023](#), incarcerated people once again became eligible for Pell Grants, critical need-based financial aid, for the first time since the 1994 Crime Bill stripped them of this right. Following this reinstatement, Vera worked with corrections departments in all 50 states, the Bureau of Prisons, and Puerto Rico to help them implement the new regulations. By July 2024, all 52 corrections agencies were Pell ready, meaning they had developed processes to select and approve new college partners. By the end of October 2024, the U.S. Department of Education had approved [several new programs](#).

Pell reinstatement presents colleges and corrections agencies with the opportunity to expand the programs available to incarcerated people. Vera has released research and continues to compile data on growing jobs in each jurisdiction that pay a living wage, require a Pell-eligible credential for entry or advancement, and have no statutory or regulatory barriers related to felony convictions. This data will determine what kinds of education programs can best prepare incarcerated people to obtain employment when they leave prison.

“What we know for sure is that students are ready to enroll,” said Ruth Delaney, director of Vera’s Unlocking Potential initiative. “They’ve waited nearly 30 years for this opportunity. We want to see the promise of this legislation become real,” said Delaney. “We want everybody who’s interested in college to be able to go to college.” Such programs provide people behind bars with hope for a brighter future.

→ Photo by Thomas Cain via Associated Press.





↑ Photo by Zach Chambers.

CJ's Story

CJ Suranofsky was sentenced to prison in his late 30s.

"I honestly didn't think I would come home," he said.

Then, several years into his sentence, Lee College—which has been offering college degrees to incarcerated people in Texas since 1966—started offering courses at the O.L. Luther Unit, where Suranofsky was incarcerated.

"Having the opportunity to go to college in prison started allowing me to relax and focus my energy solely on what I was going to do the day I went home," Suranofsky said. "And that's what education is in prison. It's an opportunity at a new life."

He earned an associate's degree in business management while incarcerated, as well as certificates in production management and entrepreneurship.

"Prison is dangerous. Prison is ugly. You've seen gang violence, you've seen drugs, you've seen suicide," Suranofsky said. Having something positive—like school—to focus on allowed both him and his peers to relax.

Research supports his observations that higher education programs help reduce violence in prison, creating safer conditions for incarcerated people and staff.

"Guys who were going to school [knew] that if they got in trouble, if they got a major case for whatever, they were going to lose that opportunity," Suranofsky said. "And then their mindset changes. They don't even think about doing it because they want to succeed."

Removing Barriers to Successful Reentry

Every year, nearly 600,000 people return to their communities after experiencing incarceration in federal and state prisons, and more than 11.4 million people cycle through local jails. In fact, most people who face incarceration will eventually return home. From bans on housing to discrimination in employment opportunities, people with conviction histories face serious barriers to success. Vera is fighting regressive laws and practices that make it harder for formerly incarcerated people to thrive in their communities so that they can be economically and socially mobile once they come home.

Helping more people leave prison with degrees

More than 70 percent of jobs in the U.S. economy now require a postsecondary credential, and bachelor's degrees are the best preparation for a living wage job in nearly every state. Vera's Unlocking Potential initiative is helping to expand the numbers of people who leave prison with this critical job qualification, working with Alaska, Hawai'i, New Mexico, and South Dakota to develop new credential pathways that will prepare incarcerated people for in-demand jobs in their states that pay a living wage and do not have a statutory or regulatory barrier for people with felony convictions.

Understanding the Impact of Postsecondary Education in Prison:

372+

colleges offered credit-bearing postsecondary education in the 2019–2020 academic year

40,000+

students enrolled in college through the Second Chance Pell pilot from 2016 to 2022

760,000+

people in prison became eligible for Pell Grants when access was reinstated in 2023

Securing housing for formerly incarcerated people

One in three adults in the United States has a history of criminal legal system involvement. Formerly incarcerated people often face housing discrimination and exclusionary practices when returning home. Vera's Opening Doors initiative works to ensure that a conviction history is never the reason someone doesn't have a place to live. In April 2024, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) released a proposed rule to remove barriers to HUD-assisted housing for people with conviction histories. Vera worked with partners to galvanize support and created an online tool that enabled the public to send comments directly to HUD, which resulted in more than 3,600 supportive comments.

At the state level, Vera helped advance legislation in Minnesota and Oklahoma to make housing more accessible to people with conviction histories. In Minnesota, the Minnesota Fair Chance Access to Housing Act would limit discrimination faced by people with conviction histories when trying to secure housing. The bill passed out of the Housing and Homelessness Prevention Committee and will be reintroduced this year. In Oklahoma, House Bill 3499 makes tax credit housing more accessible for people with conviction histories. The bill passed the Oklahoma House of Representatives and two committees in the Oklahoma Senate and will be reintroduced this year.



Ashia's Story

It took two years of constant effort for Ashia Wilson to find a home for herself and her son to share in Lansing, Michigan. She received one denial letter after another from landlords, spending hundreds of dollars on fees for applications that went nowhere. She resorted to spending nights on family and friends' couches and, occasionally, at hotels for \$100 per night. She and her son even slept in her car once.

"It was expensive, and I couldn't afford it for long," Wilson told Vera.

Eventually, they ended up at a shelter. All the while, Wilson was working two jobs and going to school. Wilson's conviction history—she was sentenced to 90 days in jail followed by two years on probation—made it extremely challenging for her to find a stable place for her and her son to live. She spent eight months and seven days at the shelter in Lansing before she found a landlord who would approve her application. Finally, she had an apartment of her own.

"[The landlord] was just like, 'I'm gonna give you a chance,' and that was it," said Wilson.

Now, Wilson is working to ensure that other people experiencing homelessness also have that chance. In her role as manager of authentic engagement at the Michigan Coalition Against Homelessness, she is focused on elevating the voices of people with lived experience and ensuring they play an active role in shaping policy.

Communicating Vera's Message

Reaching new audiences and advancing narrative change

Driving change in the criminal legal and immigration systems requires messaging that combats false narratives while uplifting evidence-based alternatives to harmful practices and policies. Through strategic communications that include reports, op-eds, blogs, multimedia projects, videos, and social media, Vera reaches millions of people with our message of justice for all.

Groundbreaking research and powerful stories

In 2024, Vera reached more than half a million page views on our research and publications in addition to more than 1 million page views on our blog.

Vera's written publications shed light on the harms of the criminal legal and immigration systems and reveal data, analysis, and recommendations with the goal of transforming them.

A selection of Vera's publications from its 2024 fiscal year:

The First Year of Pell Restoration: A Snapshot of Quality, Equity, and Scale in Prison Education Programs

June 2024

Coordinating Safety: Building and Sustaining Offices of Violence Prevention and Neighborhood Safety

November 2023

Freedom and Justice: Ending the Incarceration of Girls and Gender-Expansive Youth in California

April 2024

Vera prioritizes using our platforms to elevate the diverse voices and opinions of people personally impacted by the criminal legal and immigration systems, including those who are currently behind bars.

Some of the dozens of impactful stories we have published include:

Clemency and Prison Education Benefits Everyone

By Gregory Mingo, May 2024

What a Day in Prison is Really Like

By David Sell, March 2024

Coming Home after Nearly Three Years in Jail

By Myles Martin, November 2023

Making news

Vera has earned a position as a trusted source for quality research and analysis of the criminal legal and immigration system. As a result, Vera's expert perspectives are frequently sought by national and local media, allowing us to advance our reform goals by uplifting our research and shaping public perspective.

Some of Vera's most impactful media appearances in its 2024 fiscal year:

Why Do Americans Always Think Crime Is Going Up?

Vox, June 27, 2024

How Effective Are Crime-Focused Political Ads?

CBS News, April 10, 2024

*Immigrants Are Excluded from the Right to Legal Representation.
It's Time to Change That.*

USA Today, March 27, 2024

Making a digital impact

In the past year, Vera has made significant strides in engaging a broader audience through innovative platforms and campaigns. Notably, the launch of our TikTok channel has allowed Vera to connect with young advocates, fostering a vibrant community around critical issues. Our partnership with social media influencers for our "Safety Is Serious" campaign amplified our message, highlighting the need for real public safety solutions and the importance of challenging fearmongering and ineffective, outdated, "tough-on-crime" policies. Our team continues to encourage impactful advocacy actions related to housing, drug policy reform, and immigration protections.

"Although our prison system may not be as accommodating as those in Scandinavia, there are many men and women who have dedicated their lives to change and would do more good in their communities, alongside their families, rather than deteriorating in prison. While incarcerated, I have met amazing men—men who have influenced my life in truly transformative ways. They are woven within my every accomplishment. These are mentors I will never forget. And they deserve a second chance in a system that, for those with lengthy prison sentences, has yet to provide any meaningful hope of returning home. For those men and women, I often ask myself, 'When is enough enough?!' For our families, I say the same."

—
David Sell, *What a Day in Prison is Really Like*



↑ Photo by Ben Margot courtesy of Associated Press.

Marketing and partnerships

The 30-Year Project

September 2024 marked 30 years since President Bill Clinton signed the 1994 Crime Bill, the largest crime legislation in the history of the United States. To better understand the Crime Bill's complicated legacy, Vera launched [*The 30-Year Project*](#), a four-part limited series examining the impact of mass incarceration over the last 30 years.

The podcast was hosted by Peabody-nominated writer and journalist Josie Duffy Rice, who also hosts *Justice in America*, *What a Day*, and *Unreformed: The Story of the Alabama Industrial School for Negro Children*. Over four episodes, Vera and Duffy Rice sought to upend conventional wisdom about the infamous crime bill, detail the impact of mass incarceration on people and communities, and consider the future of mass incarceration in the United States.

The Power of Basketball

In partnership with the National Basketball Social Justice Coalition, Vera co-edited [*The Power of Basketball*](#), a collection of essays from NBA players, coaches, and team governors sharing their personal stories and social justice issues most meaningful to them. Vera Trustee and Assistant Coach of the Miami Heat Caron Butler wrote about his upbringing in Racine, Wisconsin, and how experiences with police, incarceration, and solitary confinement inform his advocacy today. CJ McCollum, guard for the New Orleans Pelicans, wrote about his adopted home state's reputation as the "world's prison capital," focusing on the wide-ranging impacts of juvenile incarceration in Louisiana. Tierra Ruffin Pratt, former guard for the Washington Mystics and Los Angeles Sparks, reflected on her personal connections to policing and the criminal legal system, racial disparities in police killings, and her activism as a WNBA player during the tumultuous summer of 2020.

Financials

Revenues by Type

Federal	\$105,536,215
State & City	\$400,122
Foundation	\$22,169,740
Contribution	\$10,937,802
Individual & Others	\$3,073,423
Total	\$142,117,302

Pass-Thru Funding	\$90,045,821
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Expenses

Program Services	\$131,160,393
Management and General	\$10,793,620
Fundraising	\$3,657,921
Total Expenses	\$145,611,934

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We are honored to acknowledge and thank the following nongovernmental donors who contributed \$500 or more to Vera in fiscal year 2024 (July 1, 2023—June 30, 2024). We also thank all other contributors who support Vera’s work.

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"With your help, we will continue to fight on during these uncertain times. Thank you for being with us. We need you now, more than ever."

Nicholas Turner
President and Director