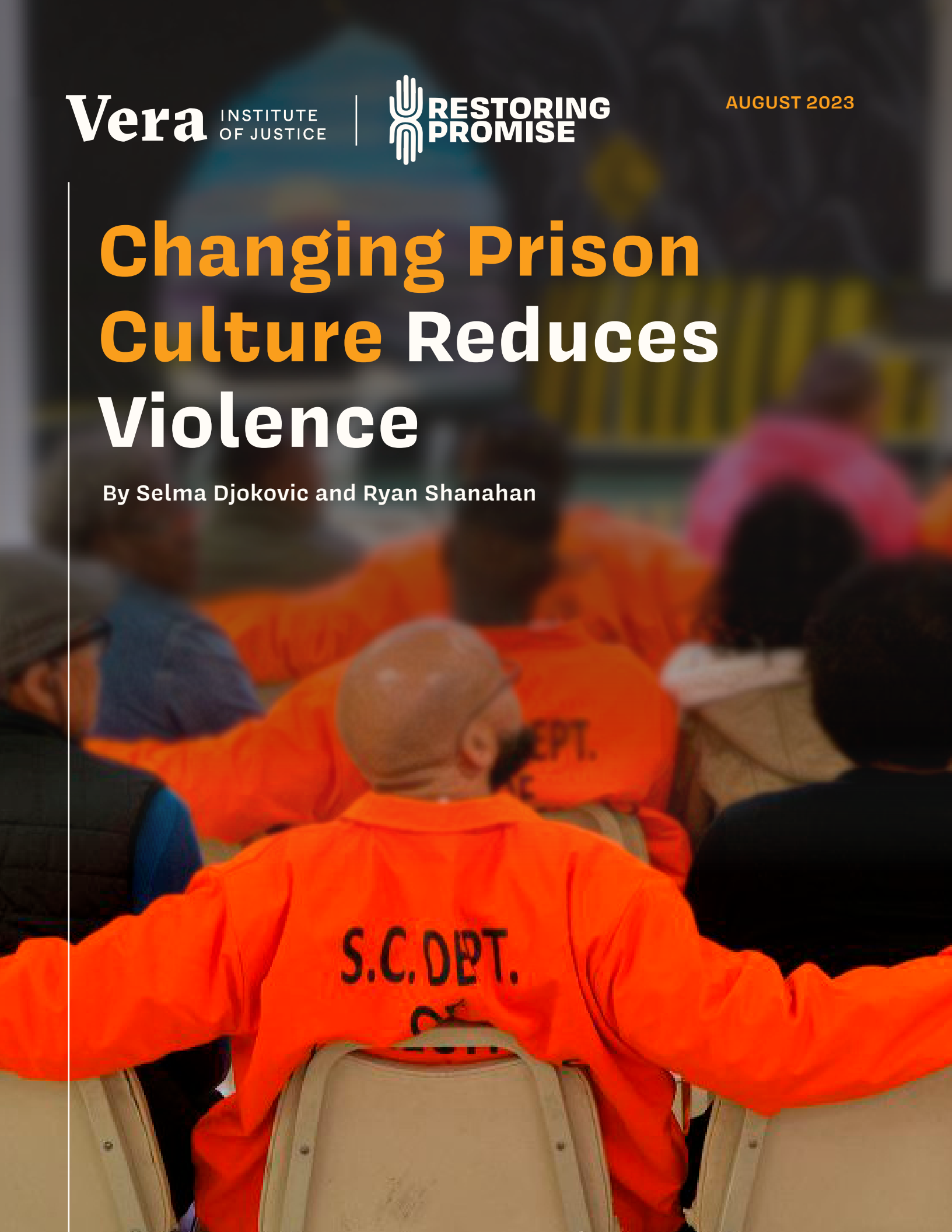


Changing Prison Culture Reduces Violence

By Selma Djokovic and Ryan Shanahan



Compared to those housed in the general population, living in a Restoring Promise unit decreased young adults' odds of being convicted for a violent infraction by 73 percent.

Findings from a randomized controlled trial (RCT) conducted in prisons in South Carolina show that Restoring Promise's approach to culture change significantly reduces prison violence and the use of restrictive housing (commonly referred to as solitary confinement).¹

Restoring Promise

Restoring Promise, an initiative of the MILPA Collective and the Vera Institute of Justice (Vera), works with departments of corrections to transform housing units so that they are grounded in dignity for young adults (ages 18 to 25) in prison. Launched in 2017, Restoring Promise is now operating in six prisons and one jail across five states. The housing units are led by trained corrections professionals and mentors—incarcerated people over the age of 25 who are serving long, often life, sentences who live on the unit with and guide the young adults. Participation for young adults includes living in a designated housing unit, having a structured and meaningful daily schedule, being connected to mentors, developing leadership skills, enhancing connections to family and community, and designing and participating in specialized programs and activities. The program strives to transform the prison culture into one of accountability, healing, and learning.²

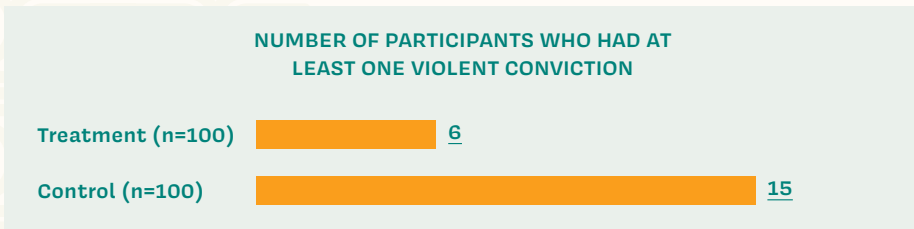
The findings

Restoring Promise housing units had less violence and fewer restrictive housing unit stays.

Findings from an RCT conducted in South Carolina show that Restoring Promise's approach to culture change in prisons significantly reduces violence. Young adults living in a Restoring Promise unit experienced a 73 percent reduction in the odds of a conviction for a violent infraction and an 83 percent reduction in the odds of a restrictive housing stay during their first year of participation, compared to the control group in general population. These numbers account for a range of factors that may have implications for the outcomes (including custody level, education level, pre-treatment outcomes, length of time in the study, race, and age). Researchers looked at other outcomes and did not find significant treatment effects (disciplinary misconduct, grievances, injuries, staff use of force, and medical/mental health interventions).



Two and a half times the number of young adults were convicted for a violent infraction in the control group than in Restoring Promise.



Additional results demonstrate potential for a broader impact.

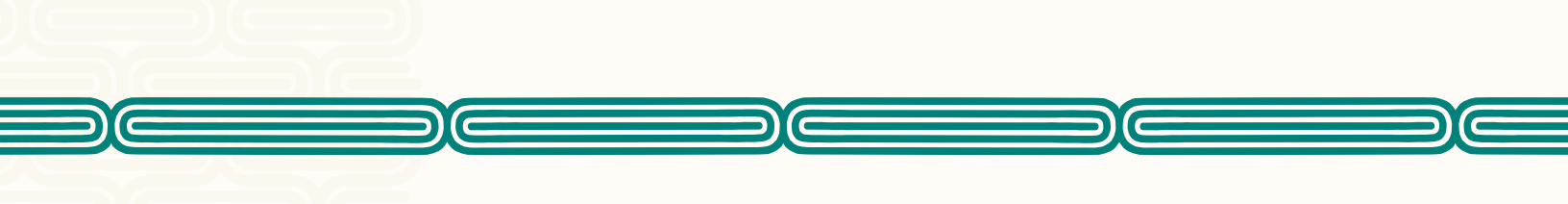
The RCT compared two groups of people who applied to live on the Restoring Promise housing unit. To understand if young adults who choose to apply experience different outcomes from those who, given the opportunity, choose not to apply, researchers also conducted a propensity score matching analysis. (See “Research methods” for more information.) The findings showed no significant differences in violent outcomes between RCT control group applicants (who applied for but did not receive a spot in the program) and the nonapplicant comparison group. The results indicate that similar program benefits could be expected if more units were opened across the system.

Research methods

This brief summarizes two studies that together addressed three research questions. The first study is a randomized controlled trial (RCT) that Vera conducted in the South Carolina Department of Corrections from January 2019 through April 2021. The study sought to understand whether, and by how much, Restoring Promise reduces young adults' incidences of violence and misconduct. The study compared outcomes derived from department administrative data for two groups of young adult men—ages 18 to 25—for one year. Vera randomly selected 200 young adults from a Restoring Promise applicant pool in 10 waves over the course of 14 months. From this sample, Vera randomly selected 100 people to live on a Restoring Promise unit and 100 to stay in the general population. The study used an “intent-to-treat design,” meaning that the analysis included participants' outcomes in the treatment group regardless of how much, or how little, time the young person actually spent living on the Restoring Promise unit.

It is possible that the outcomes of people who apply to live on a Restoring Promise unit differ in meaningful ways from those who do not apply. To understand if this was true, the project included a propensity score matching component. This is a statistical analysis that allowed researchers to compare the outcomes for two groups of young adults: the control group from the RCT and a matched group of nonapplicants from the general population.

The second study examined how Restoring Promise is implemented and experienced across diverse correctional environments. Vera researchers analyzed programmatic records to compare implementation of core components of Restoring Promise's approach across five units in three different corrections agencies. The researchers also used latent class analysis (a statistical technique) to identify patterns in responses to the Restoring Promise Prison Culture Survey from incarcerated young adults and staff in the three agencies. The survey covers a variety of questions related to the conditions, perceptions, and experiences of living and working in prisons.



Restoring Promise operates successfully across diverse environments.

Vera conducted a cross-site analysis of Restoring Promise units in three states and five units—a men’s jail in Massachusetts, a women’s and a men’s prison in Connecticut, and two men’s prisons in South Carolina. The analysis found that the Restoring Promise approach, while tailored to each prison setting, has several fundamental components that are consistent across sites.

01

Restorative practices. Restoring Promise units resolve conflict in ways that prioritize accountability, peer support, positive reinforcement, and restoration rather than punishment.

02

Family engagement and partnership. Restoring Promise encourages active involvement from young adults’ loved ones in their progress and case management. Staff engage the young people’s loved ones to help them succeed in prison and during their transition out of prison.

03

Mentorship. Older incarcerated people work with staff to support young adults’ growth.

04

Normalcy in the living environment. Life on the inside reflects life on the outside as much as possible. For example, young adults follow a daily schedule that is structured to reflect the schedule a young adult would follow outside of prison (the times when they wake up, have breakfast, go to classes/work, and engage in recreational activities, etc.).

05

Staff as leaders and agents of change. Staff are trained and provided with the tools to work with young adults in new ways and create a community they are proud of on the housing unit.

Across all locations, young adults and staff reported positive experiences resulting from the changes to prison culture implemented by Restoring Promise. Furthermore, corrections professionals working on Restoring Promise housing units reported feeling safe and finding purpose in their work.

The three states studied have different challenges and opportunities—they are geographically diverse, have varying political landscapes, and serve different populations. These findings suggest that Restoring Promise can yield similar impacts in various settings.



Policy implications

- **Young adults deserve special attention.** The findings on violence reduction are exciting, but it is important to note that the study found no effect of culture change on disciplinary misconduct. This is not surprising. Young adulthood marks a unique life stage between childhood and adulthood. It is a time of risk-taking and boundary testing. For young adults, both in and out of prison, this can mean acting out, being impulsive, testing relationships, and breaking rules. Departments of corrections should consider the science of human development as they plan for how to work with young adults.³
- **Young adulthood is a crucial time of change and opportunity, but everyone deserves to be treated with human dignity.** Although young adults require special attention, the core elements of the Restoring Promise approach could benefit all people who work or are incarcerated in correctional settings. For example, all incarcerated people should be supported in making meaningful connections with people inside and out—connections to the corrections professionals who work around the facilities and to their loved ones and community volunteers. Corrections agencies should also help all incarcerated people maintain their individuality—by providing opportunities to decorate their living quarters, for example.

- **Leading with human dignity benefits everyone.** The study shows that it is possible to treat people in prison with dignity and improve the well-being of staff and people who are incarcerated, while reducing violence and not increasing overall infractions.
- **Corrections must invest in staff morale and well-being.** Prison reform is a vehicle by which staff roles can be elevated and their work experiences improved.
- **Sustainable change requires staff and incarcerated people working together.** As agencies embark on change processes, a critical strategy is to create working groups for incarcerated people and corrections professionals to jointly identify issues and solve problems. Representation from both groups creates buy-in and accountability.

Thinking beyond violence

There is still more to learn about how changing prison culture impacts young adult development and behavior. Reductions in violence and restrictive housing use are meaningful and important outcomes, but they tell only a part of a bigger story. Vera, MILPA, the incarcerated young adults, and unit staff do not understand Restoring Promise simply to be a violence reduction program but see it as a much larger opportunity to transform the lives of those involved in numerous, powerful ways. Vera is hopeful that further research on Restoring Promise's approach will provide greater insight into the best ways to support young people as they navigate the prison setting and their journeys into adulthood, while simultaneously reducing violence and creating safety for all.

Staff benefit from prison culture changes, too. Unpublished data from Restoring Promise sites (seven housing units in five states) finds that:

- 88 percent of staff reported feeling less stressed working on the units;
- 89 percent reported that their quality of life had improved since working on the units;
- 91 percent reported having grown professionally;
- 97 percent reported feeling safe on the units; and
- 98 percent felt like they were part of a community on the units.

ENDNOTES

- 1 For a full account of the study’s methods, data, and outcomes, see Ryan Shanahan, “Research and Evaluation in Corrections: Restoring Promise,” Final Report to the National Institute of Justice, award number 2018-75-CX-0021, June 2023, <https://perma.cc/CKY2-62YU>.
- 2 To learn more about Restoring Promise, its approach, and the locations in which it currently operates, visit <https://restoringpromise.vera.org>.
- 3 For example, see “Transition to Adulthood.” The Future of Children, Special Issue, 20, no. 1 (2010), <https://perma.cc/AEX3-E3UY>.

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