



We **CAN** Transform Prison in the United States

A photograph showing the back of a man sitting in a black chair. He is wearing a bright orange long-sleeved shirt with the words "SCDC" and "INMATE" printed in large, bold, black letters on the back. The background is a blurred office or meeting room. A man in a dark suit is standing and speaking in the background. A television screen displays a blue and white diagram. The entire image is framed by a decorative teal border with rounded corners and a double-line effect.

**SCDC
INMATE**

“It helped me in real life, because I really had anger issues and now I’m just calm. I don’t need to fight anymore [because] they taught me how to communicate better”

Young person, reflections after leaving the Women Overcoming Recidivism Through Hard Work (WORTH) unit in 2022

Mass incarceration is among the most pressing issues in the United States. Today, 1.9 million people are warehoused in prisons and jails—cramped, unhealthy spaces devoid of natural light and fresh air. Young men of color and their families carry a disproportionate share of this burden—a sadly predictable fact in a country where racial oppression has been persistent for centuries. There, they rarely benefit from things that could help them succeed, like education, care, and training. Unstimulated and deprived of positive human contact, they live constantly on the edge, hypervigilant to violence and as contributors to it. The result? A vicious, never-ending cycle. Because of this, we are all less safe, our loved ones are deprived, our families distressed, and our communities fractured. The question is whether it is possible to construct something different that disrupts incarceration in the United States. The answer is a resounding yes.

Who We Are

Restoring Promise, an initiative of the Vera Institute of Justice and the MILPA Collective, partners with prisons and jails to disrupt how incarceration works in the United States. We transform conditions inside prisons and jails for the people who live and work in them. Taking best practices from abroad and the best of youth justice reform in the United States, we repurpose existing housing units to create spaces of community and healing for young adults ages 18–25.

How We Do It

We replace the current, punitive-based model of corrections with one that prioritizes accountability, dignity, healing, and hope. We train staff to become agents of change. Young adults participate in meaningful daily activities and enjoy self-expression and family connection. Mentors, incarcerated people over 25 serving long or life sentences, help guide them.

And It Works

In Restoring Promise young adult housing units, we've drastically reduced the practice of solitary confinement and, in some places, eliminated it. People who live in the units feel much safer, more engaged, more hopeful, and more connected to their families. Staff not only feel safer at work and lead healthier lives, but they also have found greater meaning in supporting young people.

The success of our Restoring Promise units is a reflection of the potential for positive change across the country. But don't take it from us—our research proves our concept across the board.

SAFETY

Everyone feels safer. Significant reductions in violence + discipline.



STAFF MORALE

Unit staff feel a renewed sense of purpose.



FAMILY

The unit helps strengthen family connections.



In a published randomized control trial study, we found that 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.

2.5x fewer people committed violent incidents in the treatment group—Restoring Promise—than the control group—general population.

73%↓

Restoring Promise led to a 73% reduction in the odds of a violent conviction.

Things Are Different

HUMAN DIGNITY FIRST

From how people are treated to the design of the spaces to daily schedules, Restoring Promise young adult housing units are designed around respecting the dignity of every person who lives and works in them.

DAILY LIFE IS PRODUCTIVE

Young adults attend school, work, or educational workshops. Everyone is learning because everyone is teaching. The daily schedule in Restoring Promise units is designed to reflect life on the outside as much as possible.

STAFF ARE AGENTS OF CHANGE

Staff undergo intensive training in restorative justice, young adult development, and more. They take an active role in the education and daily activities of young adults.

MENTORS GIVE SUPPORT

The mentors are the heartbeat of the young adult housing units. They work on a team with staff to provide mentorship and guidance to young adults. Mentors are available day and night to create a sense of safety and community.

FAMILY ARE PARTNERS

Staff and mentors work closely with young adults' families to help strengthen connections between young adults and their loved ones.