

# Restoring promise

## Positive research results from a program that aims to transform correctional culture

By Kyleigh Clark-Moorman

*The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.*

A program designed to create safer, more structured lives for young people in correctional facilities is showing early promise as a flexible model for institutional reform that can reduce violence and the use of restrictive housing.<sup>1</sup>

Restoring Promise creates housing units grounded in human dignity for 18- to 25-year-olds in prisons and jails, informed by research on juvenile justice and international models to address institutional violence. In each unit, correctional officers and mentors — older incarcerated people serving longer sentences — help participants adjust to more structured, constructive daily schedules. Incarcerated young people in the program create and follow routines that mirror a productive life on the outside of the facility as closely as possible.

A program of the Vera Institute of Justice (Vera) and the MILPA

Collective (MILPA), Restoring Promise works with the corrections staff and mentors to co-create a supportive community environment inside their facilities. Mentors and staff aim to equip young adults with practical, social, and emotional skills to lead productive lives, both during incarceration and after their release.

By design, Restoring Promise also benefits correctional officers, who often suffer from violence and stress within facilities. An in-depth evaluation of Restoring Promise, sponsored by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ), found that participating facility staff and incarcerated individuals reported more positive institutional experiences than those who did not participate. Further, the program significantly reduced the likelihood of violent disciplinary infractions.

The positive results suggest that Restoring Promise can enable correctional facilities to improve their culture and reduce violence.

NIJ Director Nancy La Vigne said, “This landmark study gives us credible evidence that transforming prison culture to prioritize human

dignity creates safer environments for all who reside and work in correctional facilities.”

### A need for correctional solutions to physical danger and psychological harm

Laws and regulations require prisons and jails to provide a safe environment that supports rehabilitation; however, the troubling reality is that many institutions and their populations experience a violence-ridden, adversarial environment that keeps those legal mandates beyond reach.

For incarcerated people, the correctional environment may increase incidents of trauma and minimize their ability to develop prosocial ways of thinking, living, and interacting with others.<sup>2</sup> In addition, most traditional correctional facilities rely on punitive measures to control those who harm others or violate rules. Those facilities may employ restrictive housing or issue punitive citations rather than take a restorative justice approach to discipline.

A restorative justice approach emphasizes the need to repair the harm caused by the action. When all stakeholders — victims, those who committed the offense, the community, and criminal

justice officials — participate, healing can occur.<sup>3</sup> A restorative approach holds those who commit offenses accountable for their actions. It is an approach that has been embraced by Western

European and Scandinavian correctional systems to create real change in individuals, reduce conflict between officers and incarcerated populations, and support those returning to their communities.<sup>4</sup>



## RESTORING PROMISE PILOT SITES

Seven correctional institutions in five states currently operate Restoring Promise programs. Vera and MILPA selected each facility for evaluation after an application process.

Institution and Restoring Promise Unit	State	Established	Description
<b>Arkansas Valley Correctional Facility   Change Maker's Village</b>	Colorado	2021	The Change Maker's Village, housed at Colorado's Arkansas Valley Correctional Facility, is a medium-security facility for men. Eleven mentors work with 60 young adults. During the day, nine staff are on the unit.
<b>Cheshire Correctional Institution   T.R.U.E. Unit</b>	Connecticut	2017	Connecticut's T.R.U.E. (Truthfulness, Respectfulness, Understanding, and Elevating) unit, housed within the Cheshire Correctional Institution, is the longest-running Restoring Promise site. Cheshire is a maximum-security facility for men. In 2021, Cheshire expanded to a second housing unit. Twenty-five mentors work with 100 young adults on the unit. During the day, 12 to 15 staff are on the unit.
<b>York Correctional Institution   Women Overcoming Recidivism Through Hard Work (W.O.R.T.H.)</b>	Connecticut	2018	Connecticut houses the only Restoring Promise site at a women's prison. W.O.R.T.H. (Women Overcoming Recidivism Through Hard Work) exists at York Correctional Institution. York is a maximum-security facility for women. Eight mentors work with 30 young adults on the unit. During the day, eight staff are on the unit.
<b>Middlesex Sheriff's Office   P.A.C.T. Community</b>	Massachusetts	2018	The Middlesex Jail and House of Correction is the only jail in the Restoring Promise initiative. P.A.C.T. stands for People Achieving Change Together. In general, six mentors work with 35 young adults. During the day, four staff are on the unit.
<b>North Dakota State Penitentiary   U.N.I.T.Y. Village</b>	North Dakota	2022	U.N.I.T.Y. (Using Natural Integrity for Teaching Youth) Village is located at North Dakota State Penitentiary, a maximum security for men. Fifteen mentors work with 45 young adults. During the day, 6 staff are on the unit.
<b>Lee Correctional Institution   Cadre of H.O.P.E.</b>	South Carolina	2019	Cadre of H.O.P.E. (Helping Other People Evolve) is housed at Lee Correctional Institute, a maximum-security prison for men. The average sentence for young adults at the Lee Correctional Institute is 18 years, and 85% of young men at Lee are Black — higher than the national average for similar offenses. Fifteen mentors work with 56 young men. During the day, two to three staff are on the unit.
<b>Turbeville Correctional Institution   C.O.R.E. Village</b>	South Carolina	2018	The C.O.R.E. (Community Opportunity Restoration Enhancement) Village, housed at South Carolina's Turbeville Correctional Institute, is a medium-security facility for men. C.O.R.E. is designed for young adults sentenced under a state law that allows judges to give either a sentence of less than three years or specialized parole supervision. Fifteen mentors work with 50 young men in the unit. During the day, two to three staff are on the unit.

For facility staff, a violent, adversarial environment may induce high rates of stress that affect their physical and mental health and harm their professional and personal relationships.<sup>5</sup> Conditions in many facilities can make officers believe that if they authentically engage with incarcerated individuals, they will become vulnerable to manipulation.<sup>6</sup>

Traditional correctional environments that typically address infractions with punitive measures (rather than measures based on restorative justice principles) can amplify harmful stress levels inside the facility.

Taken together, these factors may help explain why the United States has such high levels of institutional violence, and why jails and prisons throughout the country experience

alarmingly high rates of correctional officer attrition.<sup>7-8</sup>

Restoring Promise is a programmatic response to correctional cultures of violence and adversity.

### An initiative to transform correctional culture

When the Restoring Promise initiative began in 2016, the goal was to engage with agencies across the nation to improve correctional culture.<sup>9</sup> As a first step, research on juvenile justice and international program models provided foundational knowledge of what works. To date, Restoring Promise has partnered with departments of corrections in seven facilities located in five states. *See “Restoring Promise Pilot Sites on page 15”.*

### The Restoring Promise philosophy

Program participants follow daily routines inside their facility that approximate life in the outside community. The program centers on four key principles:

1. Staff are key to any successful initiative.
2. Young adults are held accountable for their actions.
3. Safety is the responsibility of everyone working and living in the institution.
4. Family involvement is an important source of motivation and can reinforce positive behaviors.

*See Table 1 below, for a description of typical Restoring Promise components.*

**Table 1: Typical Restoring Promise components.**

Component	Description
<b>Staffing</b>	Restoring Promise requires staff to complete a program curriculum. Staffing ratio varies by institution, falling between 1:8 and 1:20 staff-to-participants.
<b>Out-of-Cell Time</b>	Participants have 15 hours out-of-cell time, which includes unlimited or extended access to outdoor space.
<b>Recreation Spaces</b>	Community spaces vary by unit, but incarcerated participants design the spaces. For example, units have cells refurbished for different purposes, such as meditation, religious activity, computers, or conflict resolution.
<b>Unit Responsibilities</b>	Everyone must perform assigned chores.
<b>Unit Accountability</b>	Restorative circles are used to determine responses to infractions. Restorative justice principles inform sanctions. They do not include restrictions in family phone calls or visits or the use of solitary confinement.
<b>Mentorship</b>	Mentors, who are over 25 and serving longer sentences, receive training in a Restoring Promise curriculum. Mentors live and work in the units. Program staff select mentors through a rigorous application process. Programs may have individual or group mentorship.
<b>Access to Workshops and Learning</b>	Participants, mentors, staff, and outside volunteers design and offer workshops on topics such as conflict resolution or parenting. Units have unlimited slots for programs.
<b>Community Building</b>	Units have check-ins twice a day to discuss topics such as accomplishments and mental wellbeing.
<b>Family Engagement</b>	Families attend an orientation session and regular meetings with their family members, staff, and mentors. Families have at least four visits a month.

Restoring Promise program sites support corrections professionals and mentors who work as a team to create a supportive community environment inside facilities. Everyone on the unit develops workshops and educational opportunities that help the young adults navigate incarceration and prepare them for life after release.

### Restoring Promise evaluation outcomes

Vera and MILPA researchers found generally positive results as they evaluated how units operated at the Restoring Promise sites. They explored multiple outcomes and found some commonalities in all the programs studied. Each unit provided a consistent daily routine and used mentorship, restorative justice practices, and family engagement to encourage rehabilitation. In each site:

- Mentors collaborated with staff to create daily unit schedules; they all conducted workshops and other classes, maintained accountability, and worked one-on-one with young adults in the program.
- Units often used restorative circles to foster accountability when participants broke unit agreements. In this exercise, those in the unit gather in a circle, discuss mistakes, and resolve issues together.
- Program staff encouraged family engagement by conducting a family orientation and then allowing special family engagement visits. These additional visits occurred twice

per month and allowed participants to engage in activities with their families while involving unit staff and mentors.

Restoring Promise tailored unit structure and approach to each facility's environment. Notably, the program in the women's prison allowed mentees to choose their mentor after building relationships (as opposed to assigning mentors to mentees) and hosted family meetings and phone calls in addition to family engagement visits.

Using the same five sites, researchers used a survey to identify differences in correctional culture when comparing those living and working in Restoring Promise units to those in the general prison populations. Survey findings revealed that people involved in Restoring Promise — both incarcerated individuals and correctional staff — had positive experiences associated with the program's practices, including perceptions of safety, fairness, a sense of purpose, and family connections. Compared to the people living and working in the general population, those in Restoring Promise units reported more positive experiences.

### A rigorous evaluation of program impact on misconduct

In addition to the survey, researchers conducted a randomized controlled trial (RCT) to evaluate Restoring Promise's impact on misconduct using the two South Carolina sites.

The evaluation found that young adults who participated in Restoring

Promise were 73% less likely to be convicted of a violent infraction in prison during their first year of the program, compared to those in the general population who did not participate. In addition, participation in the program was associated with an 83% decrease in the likelihood of time spent in restrictive housing units. The researchers determined that participation in the program contributed to these differences. However, the study did not find significant impacts on disciplinary misconduct, injuries, grievances, medical and mental health interventions, or staff use of force.

Because of these results, the program recently received a "promising" rating from NIJ's practice and program clearinghouse, [CrimeSolutions.gov](https://www.crimesolutions.gov/).<sup>10</sup>

### Conclusion

NIJ-sponsored research on the Restoring Promise initiative shows it to be an encouraging program framework with strong potential to reduce violence and relieve adversarial tension in correctional facilities. In evaluated facilities, Restoring Promise is associated with a lower likelihood of violence and placement in restrictive housing.

The correctional field would benefit from additional evaluations of Restoring Promise and similar models in other correctional settings, as well as more research on cost-effectiveness and program impact on participants' success upon reentry into the larger community. But research to date suggests Restoring Promise may be an effective way to make incarceration a more positive

experience for individuals living and working in prisons and jails. **CT**

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> For more information on the program, participating locations, and evaluation results, see Shanahan, Ryan. 2023. *Research and evaluation in corrections: Restoring Promise*. Washington, D.C.: National Criminal Justice Reference Service. (June). <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/306958.pdf>; and the Vera Institute of Justice's Restoring Promise website at <https://restoringpromise.vera.org>.

<sup>2</sup> Delaney, Ruth, Ram Subramanian, Alison Shames and Nicholas Turner. 2018. Examining prisons today. Brooklyn, NY: Vera Institute of Justice. (September). <https://www.vera.org/reimagining-prison-web-report/examining-prisons-today>

<sup>3</sup> Hurley, Martha Henderson. 2009. Restorative practices in institutional settings and at release: Victim wrap around programs. *Federal Probation Journal*, 73 (1). <https://www.uscourts.gov/federal-probation-journal/2009/06/restorative-practices-institutional-settings-and-release-victim>.

<sup>4</sup> Delaney, Ruth, Ram Subramanian, Alison Shames, and Nicholas Turner. 2018. Reimagining prison report. Brooklyn, NY: Vera Institute of Justice. (October). [https://www.vera.org/downloads/publications/Reimagining-Prison\\_FINAL3\\_digital.pdf](https://www.vera.org/downloads/publications/Reimagining-Prison_FINAL3_digital.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Wills, Candence, Kayla Bates, Natasha A. Frost and Carlos E. Monteiro. 2021. Barriers to help-seeking among correction officers: Examining the influence of institutional culture and structure. *Criminal Justice Studies*, 34(4): 423-440. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1478601X.2021.1997276>.

<sup>6</sup> Higgins, Ethan M., Justin Smith, and Kristin Swartz. 2022. "We keep the nightmares in their cages": Correctional culture, identity, and the warped badge of honor. *Criminology*, 60(3): 429-454. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9125.12306>; Wooldredge, John. 2020. Prison culture, management, and in-prison violence. *Annual Review of Criminology*, 3: 165-188. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-criminol-011419-041359>.

<sup>7</sup> Widra, Emily. 2020. No escape: The trauma of witnessing violence in prison. Prison Policy Initiative. (December). <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2020/12/02/witnessing-prison-violence>.

<sup>8</sup> Prison Policy Initiative. 2022. *Working in "a meat grinder": A research roundup showing prison and jail jobs aren't all that states promise they will be*. (May). [https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2022/05/09/correctional\\_jobs](https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2022/05/09/correctional_jobs).

<sup>9</sup> For more information on the program, participating locations, and evaluation results, see Shanahan, Ryan. 2023. Research and evaluation in corrections: Restoring Promise. Washington, D.C.: National Criminal Justice Reference Service. (June). <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/306958.pdf>; and the Vera Institute of Justice's Restoring Promise website at <https://restoringpromise.vera.org>.

<sup>10</sup> Add CrimeSolutions page once published.



Kyleigh Clark-Moorman is a social science research analyst at the National Institute of Justice. Dr. Clark-Moorman supports research on corrections.

MEMBERSHIP  
**\$35**  
PER YEAR!

Enjoy a year of Corrections Today for **FREE** as one of the many benefits of ACA membership!

- Quarterly Corrections Today magazine
- Discounts on training
- Nominate individuals to leadership positions
- Digital ACAConnect and Corrections Digest e-newsletters
- Voting privileges in ACA elections (excludes Associate Members)
- Discounts on ACA publications, videos and e-learning courses
- Customized savings on dining, retail shopping, travel and entertainment

**Membership Services Support Center: 1-866-538-1929**

Visit  
**aca.org**  
under the  
**Membership**  
tab