

Nation Swell

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5 States' Innovative Plans to Keep People From Behind Bars

The United States locks up more people than any other country. What are we doing about it?

In [a recent interview with NationSwell](#), Bill Keller, editor in chief of [The Marshall Project](#), said one of the greatest problems facing the prison system is “the way the system scoops up young (mostly) men (mostly) from distressed communities, uproots them from family and community, does little to prepare them for a non-criminal life, and then deposits them back in those same communities.”

As experts debate how best to reform the country’s prison system, these programs are already working to reduce recidivism by preparing inmates for life outside of jail.

1

California Takes Prisoners Diving

California’s [Marine Technology Training Center](#) is a state-run program that turns felons into divers, welders, riggers, construction supervisors and mechanics. It’s succeeded in doing something that the state’s department of rehabilitation has failed at miserably: consistently rehabilitating criminals. California’s recidivism rate is an astonishing [63.7 percent](#). In contrast, the dive program’s rate is less than 15 percent.

The diving center offers felons a skill set that leads to a more lucrative career path than many were capable of before they were convicted. Despite little knowledge of diving, inmates are attracted to the program because they want to build a better life once they’re released. (Annual diving salaries can climb to \$100,000 within four years.) And if the monetary motivation to stay out of trouble isn’t enough, the program’s physical training and camaraderie give criminals a platform to build character, discipline and a sense of self-worth that directs them toward a crime-free lifestyle.

“It helps you with your morals. You have a certain pride in what you do and respect for yourself,” says William Jones, a felon convicted of armed robbery and student of the diving school. “I’m a different person now. There’s no reason for me to go out there and start doing the things I was doing.”

Any convicted felon in a Level 1 prison facility (a low-security area where less dangerous offenders are housed) can apply to the dive school. Applicants must have at least 18 months of their term remaining and no more than three years left. Due to the intense physical training, of the 200 inmates who sign up per year, only around 20 graduate. Instructors say all inmates who pass the first week’s physical tests go on to graduation, achieving something they thought was impossible.

“The secret is we change the inmate’s way of thinking,” says Fred Johnson, the marine center’s instructor. “We teach them they’re not losers; that they can be winners.”

2

Illinois Cooks Up Promising Careers

In Chicago’s Cook County jail, inmates are finding deeper meaning in chopping, sautéing and kneading as a part of a 90-day pilot program which aims to teach them employable kitchen skills.

The jailhouse prison kitchen is a far cry from a chef’s prep station at a restaurant. Knives are tied down to prevent them from being turned into weapons; the only stove in the room was donated. But the basement cookery stands as many inmates’ first practical job skills education, and they find the lessons revelatory: for some men, the first class marked their first whiff ever of fresh basil, rosemary and thyme. Additionally, they’re not only learning nutritional facts (think: olive oil instead of a fast-food fry-up), but also how to use all their senses as they see, touch, smell and taste.

“In three months, I can’t do miracles,” chef and teacher Bruno Abate [tells DNAinfo Chicago](#). “My mission is to transfer to them the love of food.”

Job-training programs such as this not only reduce unemployment, but recidivism as well, experts say. One participant, 19-year-old Darien, found the kitchen to be a familiar since his uncle is a chef. He might follow in his relative’s footsteps, but first, “I want to go somewhere else. A different state. The farther you go, the less people you know. I got in with the wrong people,” he says.

3

Hawaii Gives Time Outs to Offenders

When probationers in felony trial judge Steven Alm’s courtroom ignored their requirements, the only punishment was to send them back to jail — but only after many months and many incidents later. The lack of immediate consequences seemed to encourage offenders to flout the rules.

So Judge Alm launched the HOPE program (Hawaii’s Opportunity Probation with Enforcement) that targets people at the highest risk for probation violations. Instead of taking drug tests at scheduled appointments, the participants can be tested at any time, with only a few hours notice. For each violation, the courts impose an immediate punishment. “Swift and certain is what’s gonna get people’s attention and help them tie together bad behavior with a consequence and learn from it,” explains Alm.

The HOPE approach is working. The Department of Justice found that participants are 55 percent less likely to be arrested for new crimes compared to those in regular probation programs, spend half as much time in jail and are 72 percent less likely to use drugs.

While the program increases the workload of police officers and criminal justice employees, the outcome is clearly worth it. In fact, not only is Hawaii embracing the program, but 17 additional states are as well.

4

Texas Takes to the Airways

For those behind bars, there are restrictions on phone calls and visits. And sometimes, family and friends have to travel long distances, making in-person visits even more infrequent.

No one understands this isolating lifestyle more than ex-convicts, who advocate for fostering a support system outside of jail to help reduce the chance of recidivism. One former inmate doing just that is Ray Hill, creator of "[The Prison Show](#)," a two-hour program dedicated to Texas's inmates and hosted on the publicly-funded [KPFT](#) radio station every Friday night.

"Without a support system, when they walk out those doors, they're going to fall back into the problems that brought them there in the first place," says Hill.

The show features a variety of segments including call-ins from friends and family, live music performed by former inmates and news programs addressing prison issues like prison health, civil rights and the death penalty. While it only reaches one-sixth of inmates in Texas (which has the largest correctional system in the U.S. with 109 prisons), it serves as an example for other correctional facilities; similar shows have popped up elsewhere.

Ultimately, "The Prison Show" is the chance for convicts to be part of a greater community. Show producer David Collingsworth, a former inmate, first listened in from his cell. "It showed me that somebody cared," he says. "Somebody was actually out there who cared."

5

New York Reframes Education

At the Otisville Correctional Facility, a medium security prison in New York where many inmates are serving life sentences, a group of young men meet weekly to debate philosophy and discuss composition.

This classroom is part of the [Prison to College Pipeline](#) (P2CP), a partnership between the City University of New York (CUNY) and the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS). Led by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice and Hostos Community College, the initiative selects inmates who have high school diplomas or GEDs and are eligible for release within five years to enroll as students through a process that includes assessment tests, submitting essays and sitting down for an interview — much like the traditional college application process.

Since being founded in 2011, the program boasts 12 students that have been released back into society, plus four that are enrolled at CUNY institutions (two at John Jay, one at Hostos and another at Bronx Community College) while two others have started the enrollment process. All of the men are employed and enrolled in a training program or an internship.

As the New York Times [points out](#), prison education programs can go beyond preventing prison recidivism and crime prevention. A program to engage young inmates could serve as a model to educate wayward youth in troubled communities — preventing entry into the correctional system altogether.