

We affirm that US prisons ought to prioritize rehabilitation over deterrence for non-violent drug offenders.

Our sole contention concerns fixing a broken system.

Mass incarceration is plaguing America. [Dana Korsen of the National Research Council in 2014](#) finds that “after decades of stability, the United States' incarceration rate more than quadrupled in the past 40 years, increasing the country's penal population to 2.2 million adults.”

[Etienne Benson of the APA explains in 2003](#) that since the mid-1970s “rehabilitation has taken a back seat to a ‘get tough on crime’ approach that sees punishment as prison's main function”.

This approach has failed, as [Donald Ritchie of the SAC reports in 2011](#), deterrence is ineffective, as criminals more strongly consider the short term benefits of committing a crime rather than potential future penalties. Moreover, harsh sentences reinforce criminal identity and lead to more violent reoffending. [Howard Snyder of the US Department of Justice confirms in 2014](#) that 77% of all drug offenders are arrested again within 5 years.

Fortunately, there is a solution. [According to Gabrielle Wolf of Deakin University in 2018](#), in a meta-analysis of 66 studies, rehabilitation is effective in reducing recidivism.

Rehab prioritization will come in two forms.

First, promoting education.

Current prison education programs have room for expansion. [Jacob Reich of Wharton in 2017](#) finds that while 84% of state prisons offer high school classes, only 27% of state prisons offer college courses. Even in existing classes, [Rebecca Livengood of the ACLU in 2017](#) reports that prisoners are only given 45 minutes of class per day, the education often flouts legal requirements, and students receive limited or no in-person instruction.

[The Prisons Studies Project in 2011](#) explains that education provides skills needed for gainful employment, one of the defining characteristics of successful reentry into society and the best predictor for the likelihood of reverting back to illegal activity.

[The Institute for Higher Education Policy in 2005](#) conducted a meta analysis of 15 studies and found empirically that recidivism rates for incarcerated people who had participated in prison education programs were 46 percent lower than those of people who hadn't.

Second, health intervention.

Substance abuse and mental health treatments for prisoners are in need of improvement. [The WHO reports in 2005](#) that there are many effective treatments for mental disorders, but often limited available resources only reach a small proportion of those in need.

Prioritizing rehabilitation expands these programs. For example, [Beth Schwartz of the Marshall Project in 2018](#) writes that in Rhode Island, when the state focused on rehabilitation efforts, one of the first programs to benefit was addiction treatment.

A study from the [APA](#) found that medically treating drug addiction significantly improved the likelihood that inmates would stop using drugs, get out of prison, and find employment. Empirically, recidivism rates for those participating in such programs were 48% lower.

Overall, [Doug McVay of the Justice Policy Institute in 2004](#) concludes rehab programs reduce the odds of future drug usage by two-thirds and cause a 66% decline in overall arrests when compared to solely incarceration.

There are two impacts of reducing reoffending.

First, decreasing crime.

Relapsing to drug addiction leads to other crimes. [Dara Lind of Vox in 2005](#) finds that 65 percent of prisoners who'd committed violent crimes were either under the influence or were committing the crime to support their addiction. [The Department of Justice reports](#) that over 3.1 million people were victims of violent crime in 2017 alone.

Second, preventing overdoses.

After release, a prisoner's tolerance is significantly lower than it was before incarceration. Thus, [Marc Stern of the New England Journal of Medicine writes in 2007](#) that the risk of overdose for newly released prisoners is 129 times greater than for the general population.

Fortunately, rehabilitation prevents prisoners from relapsing, saving lives. [Andrew Joseph of Stat News quantifies in 2018](#) that for every 11 prisoners who receive drug treatment, one overdose death is prevented. The [National Institute on Drug Abuse](#) reports that in 2017, over 70,000 people died of drug overdoses.

For these reasons, we are very proud to affirm.