

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

Our sole contention is halting reform.

The stars have aligned for prison reform. [The ACLU reports in 2017](#) that 61 percent of Americans believe that violent criminals should be in rehabilitation programs where they can receive treatment.

Indeed, [John Wagner of the Washington Post](#) reports in 2018, the First Step Act, a reform package for all criminals, was recently passed by a landslide vote, reflecting a major pivot by the GOP from the punitive, law-and-order stance of the 1980s to policies that emphasize rehabilitation.

Prioritizing rehabilitation over deterrence for non-violent drug offenders does not introduce additional resources to prison systems – instead, it displaces existing resources from rehabilitative efforts towards violent offenders. This trade-off occurs for three reasons.

First, monetary constraints.

While prisons might have high levels of funding overall, their budgets for rehabilitation in particular are woefully inadequate. [Greg Barns of ABC News in 2014](#) explains that governments refuse to spend money on ensuring that prison is a humane and rehabilitative environment as it is in Scandinavian countries; they neglect vocational education, mental health programs, and substance abuse treatment.

[Lyn Kathleen of Purdue University](#) furthers, effective rehabilitation programs in prisons are bound to be highly expensive and unlikely to be funded. As a result, [Michael Balliro of the University of Texas Austin](#) writes, “[In] some states [which] have experimented with rehab programs, these programs compete for funding against the remainder of the prison industry, and, as a result, such programs frequently come up short.”

Second, staff shortages.

Prison rehabilitation efforts are severely understaffed. [Gaby Galvin of US News in 2017](#) writes that 80 percent of correctional officers on duty are working overtime, with some regularly working 16 hour shifts.

Allocating more staff to non-violent rehab siphons off staff initially dedicated to violent rehab. Indeed, [Etienne Benson of the APA confirms in 2003](#) that most psychologists in the criminal justice system have enormous caseloads, and this current lack of mental health professionals is already inhibiting prisoner reintegration efforts.

Third, political tunnel vision.

Rehabilitation efforts have been historically neglected by prisons, because tough-on-crime voters have sought to punish drug abusers rather than help them. However, American politics are at a unique crossroads. [The Opportunity Agenda in 2017](#) reports that after 40 years of public support for harsh criminal justice policies, public opinion research has finally moved away from punitiveness and towards prevention as the policy goal for corrections.

Unfortunately, focusing on rehab for non-violent offenders consumes valuable political capital which would have otherwise been invested in helping violent criminals. [Joseph Margulies of Cornell University](#) indicates in 2019, “focus on low-level, non-violent drug offenders in prison squanders precious political capital on a problem that [is simply not as important].” When voters perceive that the state of prison rehabilitation has been moderately improved, they lose motivation to continue advocating for it at the ballot box.

For these three reasons, a trade-off is bound to occur.

History proves this true, [as the Federal Bureau of Prisons reports in 2016](#), Obama’s prison reform package did not expand the overall budget. Instead, it reallocated resources within prisons. Indeed, [Sarah Lawrence of the Urban Institute confirms](#) that a greater interest in substance-abuse treatment lead to reduced funding for wider-scale educational and vocational training.

Rehabilitation is more important for violent criminals than it is for non-violent drug offenders. Violent offenders are more receptive to rehab because the alternative is accepting longer sentences than non-violent offenders. [Rebecca McCray of TakePart verifies in 2016](#) that rehab reduces the risk of recidivism for violent offenses by 68%, which is 20% greater than its effect on non-violent recidivism.

Moreover, violent crimes are a larger scale problem than non-violent offenses. [The Department of Justice reports](#) that over 3.1 million people were victims of violent crime in 2017 alone.

Because we have bigger fish to fry, we urge you to negate.