Arnold Ventures

Small, Safe, and Humane: A Vision for Prison Reform

The United States is home to 5 percent of the world's population, yet nearly 25 percent of its imprisoned people. Our prisons systems are massive and excessively punitive, often subjecting people to devastating conditions. We incarcerate people of color at disproportionately higher rates. And because few prisons offer treatment, job training, or cultures of respect and dignity, many people are set up to fail when they come home. On top of these harms, decades of research have shown that prisons fail to deliver sufficient public safety benefits that would justify their use as our default punishment.

500%
increase in the rate of incarceration over the past 40 years [1]

1 IN 2
adults in America have experienced the incarceration of a family member [2]

81%
of corrections professionals say efforts are needed to increase respect and address hostility between officers and those incarcerated [3]

1   Fact Sheet: Trends in U.S. Corrections (2017). The Sentencing Project. https://sentencingproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Trends-in-US-Corrections.pdf

2   Every Second (2018). FWD.us. https://everysecond.fwd.us/

3   National Survey (2018). One Voice.

It's time to transform our nation's prisons. We're supporting bold ideas to safely reduce prison populations, improve culture and conditions, increase transparency, and bolster prospects for successful reintegration.

The Problems

There are too many people in prison and sentences are too long. Incarceration is used far too often in place of more productive and effective alternatives. This leads to devastating social and economic costs. With decades of research showing prisons fail to improve public safety, it's time to rethink when we use prison and for how long.

Prisons are inaccessible and unaccountable. Despite the growth in incarceration, prisons remain opaque institutions with little accountability to the public. A profound lack of public information and oversight, coupled with a dramatic imbalance of power, have made prisons seemingly impervious to reform.

With excessive punishments and grim conditions, prisons are often inhumane. Incarceration itself—the act of losing one's freedom—should be considered punishment enough. Yet prisons pile on so many additional deprivations—cultures of fear and violence, prolonged isolation, lack of necessary services, limited access to loved ones and meaningful opportunities for self-improvement—that they violate human dignity.

Prisons leave people worse off. Most prisons lack the resources and programs necessary to address people's basic needs—let alone improve their mental health, physical well-being, and ability to successfully reenter society. Instead, time spent in prison destabilizes people's health, families, and employment. Releasing people worse-off than when they entered sets them up for failure.

Our Approach

Safely reduce incarceration. Many leaders in the field are doing critical work to reduce the size of the imprisoned population by addressing "front-end reforms." To complement this work, we will focus on advancing policies that increase the use of "back-end" release levers such as parole, as well as addressing the use of prison as the default criminal punishment.

Increase transparency, accessibility, and accountability of prisons. We will support efforts to make prisons more accountable by investing in research to document the impacts of imprisonment on well-being and success; supporting data collection on conditions of confinement; and promoting prison cultures that foster individual growth.

Promote dignity and improve well-being for people in prisons— including those who work in them. We will work with partners to fundamentally change prison environments so they support personal accountability and positive development — this will lead to better outcomes for individuals, their families, and the communities they rejoin. Improved environments will also promote safer, healthier, and more positive work cultures for corrections professionals who work inside.

Improve preparation for successful reentry. We will test approaches to prison culture and management that center human dignity and potential, increase access to effective interventions and treatment, strengthen the continuum from training and prison-based jobs to employment opportunities post-release, support family relationships, increase access to education, services and programs in prison and post-release, and reduce recidivism.