



# PRISON TRANSPARENCY PROJECT REPORT:

## *Expanding Diversion Programs and Alternatives to Incarceration*

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# EXPANDING DIVERSION PROGRAMS AND ALTERNATIVES TO INCARCERATION

## The Importance of Diversion Programs

- **Alternatives to Incarceration:** Diversion programs offer critical alternatives to incarceration, particularly for individuals who struggle with mental illness, drug addiction, and poverty-related offenses. These programs focus on treatment, support, and rehabilitation rather than punishment, providing a more humane and effective response to these issues which have always been a part of the human condition.

- **Mental Health Treatment:** Mentally ill individuals need access to proper treatment and support systems, not the punitive environment of a jail or prison. Incarcerating those with mental health issues only exacerbates their conditions, making it more difficult for them to reintegrate into society.

## Addressing Drug Addiction and Trauma

- **Trauma-Informed Care:** Traumatized individuals who turn to drugs as a form of self-medication require trauma-informed care and drug treatment in an environment where they can safely recover. The current prison system, with its dehumanizing and abusive conditions, only deepens their trauma and reinforces their dependency on substances. Most jails and prisons have rampant illegal drug use, which further exacerbates the problems of people struggling with addiction, which is a medical issue.

- **Prison as a Breeding Ground for Addiction:** Drug use is rampant in prisons, as many inmates turn to substances as a way to cope with the harsh realities of incarceration. Ironically, prisons often create drug addicts where none previously existed, due to the abusive and dehumanizing conditions that inmates endure.

- **Invest Resources Into Drug Prevention and Addiction Treatment:** Drug addiction is a health issue—whether it's mental or physical health. We need to invest more into trauma care and drug-addiction treatment programs rather than sending these people into the carceral environment. These programs are typically cheaper than incarceration, can be done on an outpatient basis, and have better

results than further traumatizing drug addicts and putting them in carceral environments filled with illegal drug use.

- **Reducing Prison Overcrowding:** Eliminating "Three Strikes" laws would help alleviate overcrowding in prisons by ensuring that only those who truly pose a danger to society are subject to life sentences. This would also free up resources to focus on investment into smart, humane crime prevention, rehabilitation resources, and reintegration programs.

## Moving Towards a More Just System

- **Legislative Action:** Lawmakers must prioritize the repeal of "Three Strikes" laws as part of broader criminal justice reform efforts. This would represent a significant step towards a system that values fairness, proportionality, and rehabilitation over excessive punishment.

- **Public Awareness and Advocacy:** Advocates for criminal justice reform should continue to raise awareness about the negative impacts of "Three Strikes" laws, building public support for their repeal and promoting alternatives that focus on restorative justice.

## Reframing the Approach to Poverty and Minor Offenses

- **Support for the Economically Disadvantaged:** Individuals who commit minor offenses, such as theft, often do so out of economic necessity rather than malice. Instead of incarceration, these individuals need financial literacy training, career coaching, and access to resources that can help them achieve economic stability.

- **Decriminalizing Poverty:** The criminalization of poverty is a misguided approach that only perpetuates the cycle of disadvantage and incarceration. People who cannot pay their bills typically are not deserving of incarceration. We must focus on providing support and opportunities for those in need rather than punishing them for their circumstances. People do not choose to be poor, and most people who struggle with lower socioeconomic status were born into that situation rather than it being a character defect. The goal of government should be to create economic conditions where more people can thrive, rather than punishing them when they struggle to keep up financially.

## 11.4 Dealing With Mental Illness Appropriately

- Mentally ill people or unhoused individuals are sometimes arrested, then jailed or imprisoned, due to the absence of a better alternative for where to house these

people. Making government investments into facilities designed to treat this special-needs audience with care and sensitivity would be a more humane, and likely a more affordable approach, than warehousing them in the carceral environment which is expensive, traumatizing, and often ill-prepared to care for mentally ill individuals. Specialized approaches are needed for individuals facing mental illness and/or homelessness. This is simply a matter of shifting resources away from prisons and jails and towards mental hospitals or homeless shelters, where the goal is to help them, rather than cause additional harm to people who are already struggling.

## The Failures of the Carceral System

- **Criminal Universities:** Prisons have become "criminal universities" where individuals are exposed to and learn criminal behaviors, often making them more dangerous than when they entered. This is not only a failure of the system but a betrayal of the supposed goal of rehabilitation.

- **Antisocial Behavior Modeling:** Many correctional staff engage in antisocial behaviors themselves, despite being tasked with rehabilitating inmates who have antisocial personality disorders. This hypocritical behavior only serves to reinforce negative behaviors in inmates, rather than inspiring them to adopt prosocial behaviors. It also creates a divide between members of law enforcement and the citizens they're tasked with serving and protecting. How are prisoners supposed to respect law enforcement when those are the very people being abusing and/or dehumanizing them?

## The Path Forward

- **Expanding Diversion Programs:** To address these issues, we must expand and improve diversion programs for certain types of crimes; this provides alternatives to incarceration. These programs should be designed to address the root causes of criminal behavior—mental illness, addiction, poverty—through targeted support and rehabilitation.

- **Reforming the System:** The entire criminal justice system needs to be reformed to focus on rehabilitation and support rather than punishment and dehumanization. By treating individuals with dignity and providing them with the tools they need to succeed, we can reduce recidivism and build a safer, more just society. When you treat people like animals, they begin to behave even more like animals; the approaches of yesteryear are not only ineffective, but inhumane as well.

This report is part of a series produced by the Prison Transparency Project, aimed at uncovering and addressing issues within the prison system. For additional reports and recommendations, please visit our website at

<https://prisontransparency.com>.