

JUSTICE SYSTEMS THE U.S. COULD ASPIRE TO BE LIKE



The United States has **ten times as many people incarcerated** as Finland, Germany, and Norway, yet we have **four to seven times the homicide rate**. How do these and other countries keep their communities safe without reliance on the mass incarceration seen in the United States?

Norway

SMALLER, MORE OPEN PRISONS



Norway uses a small, community-based correctional system. Many Norwegian prisons allow prisoners to have visitors up to three times per week. The approach enables conjugal visits with spouses. The system's emphasis is on incarcerated people building and maintaining relationships so that incarcerated individuals have a strong support system after their release, including friends, families, employers, and educators.

BETTER CONDITIONS OF CONFINEMENT



In one maximum-security prison, incarcerated individuals live in single-prisoner cells that are more like dorm rooms than jail cells. Each room has a private bathroom, a flat-screen television, and a window overlooking leafy scenery. The prison itself is decorated in bright colors and features original artwork. The prison has a fitness center, library, chapel, athletic fields, family visiting center, a school, and even a full recording studio.

SHORTER SENTENCES



More than 60 percent of sentences in Norway are less than three months, and almost 90 percent are less than a year long.

LESS RECIDIVISM



After five years, the return to prison recidivism rate is only 25 percent in Norway. By contrast, 43 percent of people who leave a U.S. prison return within five years. About ten times as many people in the United States are incarcerated as are in Norway.

Sources: Overall information the First Step Alliance (November, 2023). US News and World Report (2022). Incarceration Rate: World Prison Brief (2020). Conditions of Confinement: the First Step Alliance (November, 2023), and Fast Company (2010). Homicide rate: World Bank (2021); US Recidivism – Federal Probation (2017) and Bridges (2016).

Finland

OPEN PRISONS THAT HELP PEOPLE BUILD COMMUNITY TIES



One-third of people in Finland are in open prisons where individuals apply to serve their sentence: these facilities do not have gates, locks, or uniforms. Someone in a facility can leave daily for work or school in a nearby town and earn a wage like anyone in the community.

BETTER CONDITIONS OF CONFINEMENT, INCLUDING NUTRITION



In a Finland open prison, every meal is cooked by incarcerated residents, who go to the grocery store to buy food. People in open prisons have cell phones and bank accounts. They do their laundry and can order takeout food. There are no cages and no locks. The two-story building housing the inmates resembles a dorm or a hostel.

SHORTER SENTENCES, INCLUDING FOR VIOLENT OFFENSES



Individuals are eligible to be in an open prison regardless of the nature of their conviction. A life sentence in Finland is 15 years, with parole eligibility after having served 12 years.

LOWER RECIDIVISM AND DEPOLITICIZED POLICIES



In Finland, civil servants, not politicians, prepare all legislation drafted on criminal justice with a strong research background. Finland's reconviction rate is 36 percent two years after release. In the United States, the comparable figure is 50 percent.

Sources: *The Pulitzer Center* (Finland, 2021). Incarceration Rate: *World Prison Brief* (2020); Recidivism: *Council on Criminal Justice* (2021).

Germany

MOST YOUNG ADULTS ARE IN THE YOUTH JUSTICE SYSTEM



Sixty-six percent of young adults (aged 18 to 21 years old) who are convicted of a crime are kept in the juvenile justice system. This includes over 90 percent of those who had committed homicide and rape.

EMPHASIS ON DIVERSION AND RESTORATIVE JUSTICE



The German system prioritizes diversion and intervention, mediation and restorative practices, and educational community connections. Seventy-one percent of all young adult cases are diverted, and only two percent of cases result in a sentence of incarceration. Community service and fines may be imposed, including as a form of restitution to victims.

BETTER CONDITIONS OF CONFINEMENT FOR YOUNG ADULTS



Young people have substantially more freedom than their U.S. counterparts. Prison guards typically do not carry weapons, relying instead on communication to defuse challenging situations. The system generally does not use pepper spray, solitary confinement, or strip-searching.

LOWER RECIDIVISM



Only about 30 percent of juveniles and young adults in Germany return to prison within three years, and while recidivism data in the U.S. is measured in different ways, about 75 percent of youth in the U.S. are rearrested within three years.

Sources: *The Brennan Center for Justice* (2021). *The Marshall Project* (2018). *Columbia University Justice Lab* (2018). Incarceration Rate: *World Prison Brief* (2020). Diversion: *Springerlink* (2016). Recidivism – *Imprint* (2022).

European justice system models are being piloted in the United States.



Chester, Pennsylvania, is piloting what they call “the Little Scandinavia Prison Unit.” The facility has been open since 2022, is staffed by people they refer to as a “hybrid of a corrections officer and corrections counselor,” only houses 64 men, with residents living in single-person cells with a shared kitchen surrounded by outdoor green space and plants. Residents go to work, treatment, and school within the larger prison system and return home to their cells in this quiet environment.



North Dakota has implemented prison policies based on visits to Norway, and Republican governors and lawmakers backed these policy changes to their correctional model. The redesigned facility has been described as having classrooms with fish tanks bubbling with underwater life, and poetry slams and barbeques are regular occurrences. Incarcerated students take field trips to understand history better, and groups of incarcerated people volunteer once a month in the community, for example, serving food to people experiencing homelessness.



California is seeking to transform San Quentin, a prison that used to house people on the state’s death row, into a Scandinavian-style facility where individuals will be trained for employment to earn six-figure incomes. The facility is set to reopen by 2025.



Connecticut and Massachusetts have taken steps to implement jurisdiction, sentencing, and correctional policies that are more like the German young adult justice system model.

The barrier to moving from these “pilot” projects to a larger scale in the U.S. is moving away from the large facilities and sentencing policies established in the last half-century and reducing the population of individuals in facilities to reallocate the money spent maintaining and staffing these prisons.

Source: Chester, Pennsylvania: [Policy Research Associates](#). (2023). North Dakota: [U.S. News and World Report](#). (2019). San Quentin, California: [The Los Angeles Times](#). (2023) Connecticut and Massachusetts – [The Marshall Project](#). (2018).