

MARYLAND ALLIANCE FOR JUSTICE REFORM

Working to end unnecessary incarceration and build strong, safe communities



Model prison pilot for youthful offenders

What's the problem?

The U.S. and Maryland prison system, generally, do well at keeping citizens incarcerated. Maryland's prison population tripled between 1980 and 2006 [\[1\]](#); the subsequent decline has been too modest. Prison sentences progressively have gotten longer. And our state continues to incarcerate African-American men at a rate higher than any other U.S. state. [\[2\]](#)

However, in rehabilitating youthful offenders to become law-abiding, employed and active citizens upon return to our communities, our prisons badly fail. Maryland's most recent official report of its recidivism rate—40.5% in 2009—is too high to stop our prison's revolving door. [\[3\]](#) Current prison practices also exclude many – those with “crimes of violence,” sex offenses, and the illiterate from needed treatment programs. As an example, a Maryland prisoner without a G.E.D. cannot participate in Correctional Enterprises job training. Note that our prisons' G.E.D. rate is low.

To reduce Maryland's prison population and its repeat-offense rate, we definitely need to change what happens behind the wall to become more restorative – to build positive character traits, to educate & provide job-training all prisoners, and to

What's one solution?

Based on the model of the extremely successful prison-system of modern-day Germany and the Netherlands, Connecticut Corrections commissioner Scott Semple initiated the nationally-recognized T.R.U.E. program for young adult offenders (ages 18 to 25) in early 2017. [\[4\]](#) The program incorporates some retraining of correctional staff, with an in-house mentor system (via older prisoners), increased family involvement, intensive counseling, and increased education programs, including college classes. The program targets young offenders in light of well-recognized research showing that humans do not reach neurological maturity until age 25. It aims at greater savings in human and financial terms by rehabilitating the youngest offenders who, otherwise, would have greatest likelihood to reoffend.

Will this work?

Early results from the Connecticut pilot indicate between 80% and 100% satisfaction from participating correctional officers, prisoners and family [\[5\]](#) members; for two years, there has not been a single assault on a correctional officer or a fight between prisoners. [\[4\]](#)

Today, six U.S. states –including Connecticut (now including a women's prison), Massachusetts (including a local detention center), South Carolina (including young adults with a) brief sentences and b) much longer sentences), Colorado, Idaho and North Dakota. The intent of each program involves identification of systemic improvements that can be reproduced in other parts of a State's correctional system. The time from study phase to first prison unit is estimated at 6 months.

Status of the legislation

To initiate its “Restoring Promise” program in a State, Vera Institute of Justice seeks an application from the top administrator of Corrections, with support from the Governor and legislative leaders. A proposed bill would confirm Maryland's agreement to initiate its own model prison process.

Learn More!

1. [Lauren-Brooke Eisen, "Maryland Fact Sheet: What Caused the Crime Decline?", Brennan Center for Justice, 2/12/2015](#)
2. [Marc Schindler, "Rethinking Approaches to Over Incarceration of Black Young Adults in Maryland", Justice Policy Institute, 11/6/2019](#)
3. ["Sentenced Average Length of Stay and Recidivism", Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services, nd.](#)
4. [Bill Whitaker, "German-style program at a Connecticut maximum security prison emphasizes rehab for inmates", CBS News, 3/31/2019](#)
5. [Dean Williams, "Young Adult Prison Reform Initiative Expands to Three New States", Vera Institute of Justice, 11/15/2019](#)
6. [Jeremy Travis, "Alternative Sanctions in Germany", National Institute of Justice, 2/1996](#)
7. [Ram Subramanian & Alison Shames, "Sentencing and Prison Practices in Germany and the Netherlands", Vera Institute of Justice, 10/2013](#)
8. [Christopher Moraff, "Can Europe Offer the U.S. a Model for Prison Reform?" Next City, 6/2014](#)
9. [Harvard Medical School, "Juvenile Justice & the Adolescent Brain", 3/12/2015](#)

The Maryland Alliance for Justice Reform (MAJR) is a nonpartisan association of over forty community organizations and churches with members in every part of the state, formed to support justice reinvestment. Individual supporters include judges, attorneys, corrections professionals, as well as returning citizens, victims, and service providers.