

Report by Prison Commission Sparks National Conversation

This past June, the Commission on Safety and Abuse in America's Prisons, staffed by the Vera Institute of Justice and funded in part by the Overbrook Foundation, released its report, *Confronting Confinement*, which coincided with the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee Hearing on Corrections and Rehabilitation. At that hearing, Senator Richard Durbin (D-IL), the subcommittee's ranking member, lamented a general reluctance to talk about incarceration. "I have been in the Senate for 10 years," he said. "To my memory, this is the second time we have ever had a hearing on corrections." The need for public discussion about America's approach to imprisonment and the consequences for public safety and public health is the central theme of the report, which includes findings and recommendations to improve conditions that affect inmates, corrections officers and administrators, and the public at large.

Among the key recommendations presented in *Confronting Confinement* is that corrections systems should adopt a culture of rehabilitation and productivity as a way to reduce violence. "Few conditions compromise safety more than idleness," the Commission found. "Prisoners today are largely inactive and unproductive." The Commission advocated for making prisoner segregation—especially solitary confinement—a condition of last resort because prisoners need regular and meaningful human contact: extreme and prolonged isolation has been known to increase the risk of mental deterioration. Another recommendation proposed is that every state create an independent agency to monitor its correctional system. Prisons and jails are directly responsible for the health and safety of millions of people every year, and what happens in them impacts the health and safety of all communities. Consequently, it is in the public's best interest that there exist independent monitors invested in the safety and effectiveness of the nation's prisons and jails.

The response to *Confronting Confinement*, which encapsulates a year-long inquiry co-chaired by former U.S. Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach and retired federal Judge John Gibbons, suggests that attitudes toward examining the nation's prison system may finally be changing. More than 100 news stories, editorials, and opinion pieces based on the issues examined in the report were produced by sources such as the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and National Public Radio. Organizations ranging from the National Association of Evangelicals to the ACLU's National Prison Project have endorsed the Commission's findings and recommendations. Administrators of correctional systems are requesting copies of the report to help guide reform. Even healthcare advocates are latching onto the Commission's message that the well-being of neighborhoods and communities depends on decent correctional health care.

“Reaction to the report marks what we hope is the beginning of a renewed effort in America to tackle the problems that, in the past, were thought to be relegated within the confines of prison walls,” says Alex Busansky, the Commission’s executive director. He adds that *Confronting Confinement* does not signal the end of the Commission’s work. “We are committed to applying what we’ve learned to work toward improving the conditions of incarceration for everyone.” Commissioners and staff are now working with corrections leaders, lawmakers, and others around the nation to act on the recommendations. Currently, they are assisting the federal Prison Rape Elimination Commission develop national standards for addressing sexual assault in prisons and jails.

To download the full report or its summary, go to www.prisoncommission.org/report. For more information, contact Alex Busansky, the Commission’s executive director, at abusansky@vera.org.