

PROMISING PRACTICES

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Center for
Justice Planning



Leveraging Virtual Reality for Correctional and Reentry Support

In an increasingly technologically driven world, criminal justice leaders are learning about, deploying and assessing timely solutions to pressing public safety challenges. Virtual reality (VR), a computer-generated simulation that allows the user to feel immersed in an alternate situation or setting, is one area seeing rapid advancement and development in criminal justice, particularly in corrections and reentry. VR can be used to simulate job interviews, improve communication and teach conflict resolution skills, for [exposure therapy](#) and to assist with [navigating social situations](#).

VR USE CASES

[Pennsylvania's York County Prison](#) partnered with Comcast, the U.S. Conference of Mayors, and several community partners to deploy VR into its prison. The program allows incarcerated individuals to improve occupational skills by learning plumbing, car repair and solar panel maintenance [in virtual settings](#). It emphasizes building skills and digital literacy as a strategy to reduce recidivism. →



VR USE CASES continued

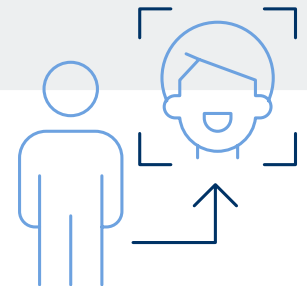
Through a grant from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the [Pennsylvania Department of Corrections](#) is piloting a VR program for incarcerated individuals and their families that focuses on virtual visitation and improving parenting skills. A collaboration through WRAP Reality and WRAP Technologies, the program allows virtual visitation through VR headsets, with children of incarcerated individuals participating in the visitation at community provider locations rather than traveling to a DOC site. The program teaches incarcerated parents how to improve their parenting and communication skills through VR-powered social scenarios.

In nearby [Massachusetts](#), a team of researchers, VR engineers and women in state prison collaborated to create three stressful and difficult virtual practice scenarios to help women upon release from prison. The scenarios simulate experiences these women may encounter in the community. The collaboration, between the Institute for the Future, the Engagement Lab at Emerson College and the Massachusetts Department of Corrections, was implemented in May of 2019 in South Middlesex Correctional Center.

The three scenarios, which serve as a kind of “pre-exposure therapy,” include:

- Receiving a ride from a friend and discovering illegal drugs and alcohol in the car;
- asking a stranger for directions or help in a busy subway station;
- and answering questions from a potential employer about their incarceration.

Through the scenarios, women have the chance to safely respond to situations that may be potentially dangerous and/or stressful.



Does it Work?

As VR technology and its implementation with correctional and reentry populations is still new, researchers are still compiling evidence on its effectiveness.

[Studies](#) have shown its efficacy as a tool for therapeutic settings, particularly exposure therapy, and initial pilots have illustrated positive preliminary results, such as decreased depressive/anxious feelings and increased chances of landing a job upon release from prison. Of course, virtual simulations, such as those that walk users through shopping experiences, are not the same as real-life experiences, but they can still be useful tools to sort through the wide array of stimuli of the experience. This is particularly important for individuals who have been incarcerated for some time, as they may feel a substantial amount of stress about conducting many day-to-day activities, some of which may have changed significantly since their initial incarceration. **VR, which is often cost-efficient, may be even more impactful when combined with other services and methods of support.**

Do you have a Promising Practice from your jurisdiction you want to share?

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