

IF we are not seeking to create and maintain peaceful communities then what are we?

THE ONLY “rehabilitative” programs that have ever proven to significantly reduce crimes committed by ex-convicts (recidivism) are post-secondary academic and vocational educational participation while in prison. “BARD PRISON INITIATIVE” in Annondale and Hudson, New York, run through a search-engine, should lead you to the findings of myriad research and studies conducted over the past half century that unequivocally prove the above-stated claim. These studies found that for every dollar spent on correctional higher education –post-secondary educational programs via PELL GRANTS that in the early 1980s were available in 90 percent of the state’s prisons (350 college programs)– two dollars were returned to the taxpayers in reduced prison costs (‘Three State Recidivism Study.’ Stearer, Smith and Tracy. 1997). Yet, DESPITE the firm advice of policy experts clear across the board, President Clinton’s 1994 Crime Bill: The Violent Crime Control and Law-Enforcement Acts effectively dismantled correctional higher education.

At Maine State Prison where I reside there are a variety of educational and “rehabilitative” programs that take up 95 percent of the space and resources in the prison’s education department. To those well-meaning citizens who actually care about how prisoner’s daily lives are managed, a list of the above-mentioned programs may seem somewhat impressive. (Often, just the mere size of a list of programs focused on achieving an objective –in this case the reform of criminals– tends to impress many or most who review the quality of the organizations providing them)

Because prisoner access to the computer producing these words is extremely limited, I have not drafted a report summarizing these programs, but I assure you the bottom-line regarding the goals of them is that:

(A) Obtaining a G.E.D. H.S. Diploma, or attending Adult Basic Education, while of course necessary to many;

(B) Attending group/lecture discussions that seek to instill in those prisoners whose history proves their commitment to severe behavioral problems, an understanding of the “Golden-Rule” towards the goal that they will incorporate this perspective into their personal philosophy and become respectable, law-abiding and productive citizens,

-or-

(C) Finding/embracing religion or 12-step recovery, while with some value, are not going to put even a marginal dent in the rates of recidivism/crime. Worse, at Maine State Prison the prisoner management policies and procedures employed, if anything, increase recidivism, and, those crimes committed by these ex-convicts are often worse than those they committed before their having served time at MSP; are often violent crimes against innocent citizens.

Because of mismanaged market capitalism and ‘fractional reserve banking’ inequality has increased exponentially over the past 20 years magnifying pressures and conflict in the lives of millions of Americans resulting in a desperation –often extreme– primarily among the middle and lower classes. This desperation of course leads to several forms of crime.

“A new federal study of recidivism based on 405,000 inmates found that after three years, 68 percent had been arrested for a new crime, and by five years, it was 77 percent. Only 39 percent of the new arrests involved drug crimes, and most involved property crimes such as burglary and robbery, or violent offenses such as assault, rape and murder. For decades, well meaning advocates have pushed for rehabilitation programs and other reforms that would reduce recidivism rates, ‘but that holy grail remains elusive.’ Deeply troubled, dysfunctional people are not easily transformed into productive, law-abiding citizens –by prison or any other institution. Prison, however, does ‘isolate criminals from society, and thereby make society safer.’ Crime rates have steadily dropped since incarceration rates began rising in the 1980s. ‘Until we find that holy grail,’ high incarceration rates may be our least worst option.” (“WHY JAILS HAVE LOCKED THEIR GATES” <Jeff Jacoby-Boston Globe> THE WEEK May 16, 2014)

Around the time of the above-stated success with anti-recidivism via Pell Grants; speaking on behalf of misguided power brokers with political/economic interests related to the crime control industry-prison industrial complex, ‘spin-doctor’ mercenaries and demagogues competing for hegemony in the various branches of the criminal justice industry began aggressively selling the speculative conclusion in Jacoby’s above-referenced article by twisting the findings of crime studies, some of which in addition to being grossly misleading were riddled with inaccurate facts. But then, it’s no crime for researchers and reporters to make mistakes!

Keeping supervisory staff costs at a bare minimum at Maine State Prison, prisoners are left in noisy, increasingly densely packed cellblocks for 95 to 98 percent of their waking life –unless they are giving themselves over to prison industries or certain other prison jobs (essentially slave-labor). THE BOTTOM LINE **that should not be**, is warehousing prisoners as cheaply as possible while justifying every dime that can be squeezed from the federal government and state budget (taxpayers) to whom, all-in-all, the prisons are a horrendous disservice.

Isolating criminals from society is but one part of the PURPOSE OF PRISONS where 95 percent of the convicts will be released to mainstream society. The worst forms of crime: violent robberies, assaults and murders, are most often committed by those who are pumped through our prisons that do not legitimately seek to rehabilitate convicts –a significant percentage of whom would reform if given the proper tools– and add insult to injury by applying dysfunctional prisoner management policies, procedures and practices that breed extreme hatred of the system. Upon rejoining mainstream society most ex-convicts are worse from the wear of prison than being merely ill-prepared to meet the employment-economic challenges they must hurdle if they are to develop a decent standard of living, most of whom have proven they do not cope well with economic strain.

The afore-stated 2014 recidivism numbers, though different regarding drug convictions in the past, have always hovered around the same high percentage, but not for those prisoners who took advantage of the Pell Grants in the 1980s.

Recently MSP was recognized as a national leader in reform measures correcting abusive uses of solitary confinement as discussed in a documentary aired on MPBN April 22, 2014 titled “Solitary Nation.” (MSP was forced to refrain from their draconian usage of solitary confinement due to years of complaints and civil litigation)

MPBN’s “Solitary Nation” should serve as WAKE-UP CALL to the reality that keeping the vast majority of prisoners cooped up in densely packed cellblocks most of their days AND denying them access to both the types of educational programming and resources, and a reasonable amount of time of access to them that will help prisoners develop the insights and skills required to sufficiently address the most serious challenges they <the 95%> will face upon rejoining mainstream society, hurts everyone of the majority of the population who are not living in the most exclusive gated communities. The above-stated conditions present a FAR-FAR-FAR greater problem than the misuse of solitary confinement.

MOST PRISONERS at MSP have televisions in their cells they either purchased at exorbitant prices or obtained through a ‘Loaner program’ that is based on their average trust account balance, and their disciplinary history. Prison staff commonly refers to the TV’s as their “babysitter.”

Called the “Boob-tube” and “Idiot box” in days gone by, I don’t need to provide you with a report on the poor quality of programming offered by basic cable. Countless sensationalistic crime drama programs (fictional and true crime documentaries like the Nancy Grace Show that turn human misery into entertainment), fantasy drama–vampires, the supernatural etc., and *scripted* reality programs that wade in the celebrity cesspool of decadence and the lower class pools of shallow ignorance, capped off by often misleading news media that seeks to keep the public on edge with shock & awe, peppered with an overwhelming number of commercial interruptions every five minutes that rapidly fire as many as 12-13 separate ads at viewers seeking to inject into their subconscious the will to purchase a product or service they likely do not want or need; keeps much of the public on edge, distracted, ignorant and pliable.

IT IS GOOD that prisoners have access to televisions; news and other programming can be very helpful coping tool, but say the least, *this access* does nothing to help convicts develop the skills they will require to effectively cope with the challenges they will face in mainstream.

There are no arguments/explanations (security reasons, etc.) that justify denying prisoners ownership of laptop computers in the same way as televisions are available (Purchase/loaner).

All incoming prisoner correspondence and media (magazines, books, music cd’s, video games) are screened by prison administration. It’s bad enough that prisoners are not allowed DVD’s, but to deny them access to laptop computers with access to educational CD-ROMS and digital downloads is outrageous to the point where unless the moral standards of society fall *completely* off the deep end of humanity, eventually this educational/rehabilitative tool *will* be, as it is in some other state’s prisons, available to prisoners at MSP. There is no reason to delay it. (In 2013 in MSP’s Close unit E-pod, MDOC Deputy Commissioner Jodi Breton told me that some form of I-pad had been approved for sale to prisoners. She laughed when telling me this policy was subject to change. Was this response to my query about this issue mere placation?)

IT IS BEYOND OUTRAGEOUS that prisoners are denied laptops and needed educational programs, yet can “keep up with the Kardashians” and immerse their brain in a host of other shallow and toxic reality shows, idiotic sitcoms, crime drama, and purchase death metal music, gangster rap, and video games, but are denied access to resources that would enrich their mind towards becoming better human beings. This sad state of affairs is due to a moral sickness that should no longer be tolerated if we care at all about our own and the health of the society future generations will inherit.

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