

A Practical Approach To Prison Reform

As we progress further into the twenty-first century, one thing is clear: serious changes need to be made to the American prison system. America has become a society with the highest incarceration rate of any nation in the world. And with well over two million men and women in America's prisons, there are more people incarcerated in the United States than any other country. In an age of record budget deficits and massive national debt, it would appear that not only are fundamental changes to the American prison system necessary, they are imminent.

I had never spent a day in jail in my life until I was arrested at the age of forty-six and sentenced to

thirty-six years in prison on a charge of "Burglary With Bodily Injury". I soon found myself incarcerated at the Wabash Valley Correctional Facility, at Carlisle Indiana. The degree of culture shock was overwhelming. As I struggled to survive and forge a life for myself, I quickly decided to enter every program available and embrace every opportunity I was presented with. My motives were two-fold: (1) to better myself and become the best man I could possibly become, and (2) to obtain an early release from prison and return to my loving family.

Surprisingly, I was granted immediate entry into every program that I applied for.

In time, my knowledge concerning the Correctional System, as well as the

people within it grew dramatically. Now, by definition, prison is not only a place of incarceration, but rehabilitation as well. And one thing is certain: the Indiana Department of Correction is very adept at the incarceration phase. However, it seemed as though there were not nearly enough rehabilitative programs for a facility housing over two thousand inmates. Just when it would have been easiest to blame the system itself, I reminded myself that I had gained immediate entry into every program I had applied for. My focus of inquiry quickly shifted. Why were so few inmates volunteering to participate in rehabilitative programs that would inevitably prove to be beneficial?

I entered Indiana State University in the fall of 2006 and immediately found my niche. Attending college not only kept me focused on

learning, it shifted my attention away from the direness of my situation. When I was assigned to research and complete a term paper for an English class, the topic I was assigned enthralled me: RECIDIVISM.

I began my research with earnest. The facts and statistics I uncovered were astounding. The national recidivism rate is nearly seventy percent! That means that the exit gate for any prison is little more than a revolving door. Of those that re-offend, eighty-five percent are unemployed at the time of the commission of their crime. Furthermore, national statistics indicate that twenty to thirty percent of the prison population is functionally illiterate. These individuals can not even read a job application, let alone fill one out! It

is apparent that upon their release the vast majority of these individuals will resort to doing what they do best: criminal activities.

Facts and statistics are extremely valuable when evaluating the effectiveness of any system or organization. In that regard, our prison system has failed miserably. The mere fact that nearly seven out of every ten offenders that is released from prison will return one day is a testament to the ineffectiveness of the prison system. It is also an indictment on a political system that continues to pour hundreds of billions of dollars into a prison system that seemingly does little more than warehouse the masses.

The obvious solution to reducing the recidivism rate is to bolster rehabilitative programs. In Indiana, only six percent of the prison

Budget is used for programs that are geared to rehabilitate inmates. Statistics indicate that an inmate that completes at least one rehabilitative program reduces their odds of re-offending to less than thirty percent. It is apparent that the money spent on rehabilitative programs is the best use of taxpayer dollars within the prison system.

Of course inmate participation is essential for any program to be effective. Inmates here at Wabash Valley have been reluctant to participate because of what they perceive to be minimal potential benefits. Few programs offer time cuts to ones sentence, and that is an important factor of consideration to an inmate sentenced to decades in prison. Many inmates that are totally rehabilitatable become discouraged by the length of their sentence. The reality

of their circumstances has left them feeling both helpless and hopeless. After serving twenty, thirty, or forty years in prison any remnants of a family are long gone. Instead, many of these individuals will spend their final years in a retirement home or mental health facility, all at the states expense.

Any rational attempt to reform America's prisons must include the expansion of rehabilitative programs. The statistics are clear: REHABILITATION WORKS! And though not every inmate is rehabilitatable, the vast majority of them are. Of course the most effective way to rehabilitate is to EDUCATE. Courses in life skills and success skills should be mandatory before any inmate returns to society. Literacy and basic educational attainment should

also be mandatory. Everyone leaving prison should at least possess a G.E.D.!

Statistically, inmates with a college education are the least likely to re-offend.

An ex-con with a minimum of two years of college has a less than ten percent chance of returning to prison. If we could give every prison inmate a college education, we could literally empty out the majority of our prisons!

In Indiana, it costs less to fund an inmate's four-year college education than it does to incarcerate that same individual for six months.

Instead of debating the cost of educating inmates we should discuss the inevitable costs of not educating them!

Of course not every inmate is capable of attaining a college degree. For these individuals

vocational or technical training may be more appropriate. By finding their purpose or niche in life while in prison, an inmate is able to prepare themselves for a successful return to society.

By offering prison inmates an incentive to participate in rehabilitational programs, we can lower the recidivism rate as well as the costs associated with mass incarceration. And by granting inmates that have been rehabilitated an early release we can turn a financial liability into a prosperous, law-abiding, tax-paying citizen. After all, isn't that what prison is supposed to do in the first place