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Warehousing the mentally ill

According to a 2013 report, when prison population dropped after an almost four-decade policy of mass imprisonment, all but one state succeeded: Connecticut. In that same year Sen. Rand Paul and U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder proposed reduced sentences and compassionate release for drug offenders to quell prison overcrowding.

Interestingly, courts deem addiction as mental illness. But these aren't the only categories of mental illness that swell Connecticut's prison population. Unfortunately, also falling through the cracks of the judicial system are bipolars and schizophrenics, to name a few.

This should prompt attention, but to the contrary: Courts, as a mechanism for punishment as deterrent, minimize precursors to crime for the career-building notch in the prosecutorial belt of justice.

In response to the "get tough" practices of American criminal justice, retired Chief Judge Patricia Wald said, "Unduly long and punitive sentences are counterproductive and, candidly, many of our mandatory minimums approach the cruel and unusual level as compared to other countries and as well as to our own past practices."

It would behoove society to question the ethics behind prosecuting without impunity the mentally ill as if they were in full mental faculty when transgressing the law.

Nevertheless, the throw-away-the-key mentality persists rather than increasing alternatives to incarceration. Unfortunately, the pro-rehabilitation alternative -- which can offset recidivism -- continues being deprioritized in Connecticut.

"Too many Americans go to too many prisons for too long, and for no truly good law enforcement reason," Holder said last August.

Perhaps he's on to something.

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