

To: The America Prison Writing Archive

From: Daniel Pirkel

Greetings. I am really excited about your program and I am enclosing an application. Could you send me some more information regarding your program? I am a student in the Calvin Prison Initiative (CPI), a five bachelor's degree program, and I am coordinating a letter writing campaign to reform the prison system. Any information that you can send me to help in this endeavor (including information about your program) will be put on a thumb drive so that it can be distributed to my other class mates' computers so that they can also be involved in your program. CPI currently has 57 students and we will reach our 100 student capacity in a few years. You may be interested in the restorative justice conference that CPI organized in March. You can check out the videos of it at www.saintbenedictinstitute.org

As for my experience: An important aspect of restorative justice is the idea of socialization-habilitation. In order to be restored to the community, a former offender often needs to learn skills that they never had or to address survival mechanisms that they have learned in prison. Statistics indicate that prisoners are less likely to return to prison if their families continue to be a part of the prisoner's life through phone calls, letters, and visits. Technology like j-pay has made this easier and cheaper in some cases, but other DOC policies hinder the socialization process. Reduced visiting hours and expensive phone rates are just a few. During visits, spousal affection, parenting time, and other aspects of normal socialization like walking or playing sports together are restricted. Without this socialization, inmates and their families feel alienated from each other. One-way communication with the outside world may reduce recidivism by showing the offenders how their actions have punished their family and what kind of things they are missing out on. When a family member is struggling with bills or with mental health issues, prisoners blame their selves for these issues because they realize that they could help if they were not incarcerated. In today's court system, offenders often do not see the consequences of their actions, as the most they may see is victim impact statements, police reports, or crime scene photos. Communication with their families give them a part of the big picture.

Predatory phone rates punish prisoners' families as well as destroy relationships and the prisoner's support group. I lost connection with my son's mother back in 2007 because the phone calls were almost \$15 for 15 minutes. Since I could not obtain her address for several years, she viewed the situation as one where I was not putting enough effort into the relationship and cut off all contact through an MDOC policy that restricts a prisoner from writing or calling a civilian on his or her request. In effect, I have not communicated with my 12-year old son since he was two. Phone rates have historically included "legal" kickbacks that helps correction departments meet their budgets. While keeping the lights on is a legitimate concern, this should never be done at the expense of the purpose of a correctional facility, that is, to correct behavior. Statistics prove that a person who maintains a social network outside of prison is less likely to return. High phone rates and visiting restrictions makes this difficult. Without this social network, people have a harder time finding housing and jobs. 95% of

prisoners eventually return to the community and it behooves us to help these people to successfully transition. Even if an x-con has the best of intentions, it can be difficult to obtain a job and housing because of the stigma associated with his conviction. This may lead to desperation, or just turn them to doing what they know best: criminal activity.

Many prisoners complain about poor prison conditions, but many people in the free world do not care, either because they do not think that it affects them, or they assume that prisoners deserve whatever bad things they have coming. To some extent, they are right. While prisoners do not deserve to be treated fairly, or to receive the quality of food, clothing, etc. that they do in Western countries, there two problems with this line of thinking: one, some prisoners are completely innocent; two, the lack of procedural justice creates animosity towards those in authority, thus cementing anti-social behavior rather than deterring it.

It has been my experience that prison officials demand respect from prisoners, while they disrespect those that they are supposed to be a role model for. Many prisoners suppress their desire to retaliate until they explode. I have seen an officer kick a guy out of the chow hall because he sat down and another prisoner gave him a piece of chicken. Essentially, the officer (Whirly?) wanted to send the prisoner to bed without dinner (one that is highly prized in prison), when the officer did not have any legitimate authority to do so. Therefore, the prisoner threw his tray at the officer. While this was not a wise choice, his choices were limited. He could have attempted to find the sergeant and complained. From my experience with that particular officer, this action would have probably resulted in disciplinary tickets (Disobeying a Direct Order (DDO) and out of place), and perhaps even a trip to segregation. I know this because that officer gave me an out of place ticket for getting a food item from someone in a similar manner. At this particular facility (Level IV, high security), moving anywhere other than directly to the chow hall, or to a callout and back would result in a major ticket, (often classified as an attempted escape, even if you were nowhere near a fence).

The other thing that the prisoner could have done is to have gone back to the unit and informed the C.O. what had happened, and hope that he or she would call food service and order a tray. The C.O. may do this, or he may call the prisoner a liar, as prisoners have not been known to be the most honest people in the world. Even so, many C.O.s have developed an attitude of sheer paranoia. No one likes to be tricked, and a person with unlimited power can do whatever they want in an attempt to prevent this. In this event, the only thing that the prisoner could resort to is a grievance, in which case he may receive a response in about a month, with no relief in sight. Most prison officials will not even reprimand their underlings, let alone administratively punish them. They certainly will not give the prisoner an extra piece of chicken to make up for the night of hunger the prisoner suffered. So what did the people involved learn from this situation? Cheat the system because the system will cheat him.

I have heard many times during the last ten years where someone has been killed by his Bunkie or roommate even though the victim went to the officers or counselor with concerns that he felt threatened, and my experience tend to confirm these rumors. There have been several situations where I have tried to be moved to another room/cell because I felt that I was going to get in a fight with my Bunkie or roommate, and I was met with outright lies or sheer indifference. In fact, I tried to move within the last year and it took over four months. When I talked to the counselor, he merely shrugged his shoulders and said that it was not his problem. I then informed him that he was bound by federal law to move inmates when they felt threatened. He said that he cannot make any promises. It took another three weeks before he moved me. The laziness and/or apathy of this behavior baffles me. All they have to do is change a couple of names in the computer, but they would rather risk a law suit and someone else's life. This particular counselor seemed to think that a fight would have been no big deal, but assaultive tickets create a significant hardship on prisoners. Even if the incident is caught on camera and clearly demonstrates that prisoner is defending his self, he will likely receive a fighting ticket, which the parole board will promptly use to "demonstrate" that he is rehabilitated. A "simple" fight could cost someone their freedom for an additional two years.

I recently did a research paper on procedural justice. In "American Policing at a Crossroads: Unsustainable Policies and the Procedural Justice Alternative," authors Stephen J. Schulhofer, Tom R. Tyler, and Aziz Z. Huq describe the procedural justice model of policing. Research demonstrates that citizens are more likely to comply and cooperate with officers when they perceive that the authorities are legitimate (338), and police that follow the procedural justice model build their legitimacy by treating citizens with courtesy and respecting their rights (346). When civilians comply and cooperate, officers do not need to use force, but when the government employs policies that people perceive to be unfair, even normal, law abiding citizens begin to resist (355). This has played out within the U.S. government recently. When President Trump issued his travel ban executive order, many government officials refused to enforce it. Even cops will resist policies that they perceive to be illegitimate (360).

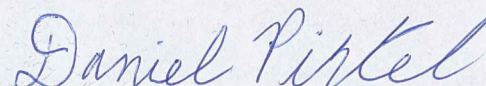
I have found a significant amount of resistance that to reform the prison system, it takes prisoners who are dedicated to filing grievances, law suits, etc. The problem is that there are maybe one out of a hundred who are willing to do this for a few reasons: #1. They fear retaliation. #2. Grievances and law suits have very limited success. Retaliation often takes the form of a "ride out" of the facility or false tickets. When Prisoners are transferred to another facility, they may lose a high paying job that took years to wait for and work towards. False tickets are nearly impossible to overcome because there is no due process. You would be lucky if your hearings investigator checked the camera (if the footage does not disappear first), and they will almost always take the officer's word over yours, despite how ridiculous their story is.

The federal law regarding lawsuits makes winning them incredibly difficult for even talented attorneys, and the Courts usually dismiss them while charging the petitioner \$350.

This mess is not to be blamed solely on the powers that be, as many prisoners are willing to complain verbally incessantly to their fellow prisoners, but are unwilling to make any effort in rectifying the situation, even if it means simply asking the officer to create a work order for a broken bathroom fixture. Instead, they place all responsibility to improve living conditions on the block rep. Some prisoners numb their selves to their problems as a survival mechanism; they have resolved their selves to do their time (even life sentences) through hobbies and whatever makes the time go by the fastest. Because there is no procedural justice, many believe that violence is the only thing that will fix the situation. This the reason why there was a riot at my former prison in Kincheloe, Mi. This facility had been closed for 67 years (because of black mold?) when the MDOC transferred all of the inmates from Kinross Correctional Facility to it in 2015. When we moved in, the ventilation system was still mothballed (stuffed full of insulation), no shelves on beds for TVs, no cable, there was two phones for 80 inmates, and there was one microwave in each unit for over six months. Over 90% of the prisoners refused to go to chow for a day, and then spent 30 minutes on the blacktop 1,000 deep. The administration did not respond to any of the complaints. Instead of keeping up the pressure by contacting the media and continuing to do hunger strikes, inmates lit units on fire and broke into counselor offices six months later.

Many just do not know how to combat the system. Here is some advice: help wherever you see a void. Failing to write grievances is tantamount to create policy proposals for senators, seek public support through religious or philanthropic organizations, teach classes. Outsiders can help too. Although you will have a hard time to convince prison officials how to teach prisoners how to file lawsuits, they may allow prisoners or volunteers to teach college prep classes. Write newspapers about your experience in trying to visit someone in prison, or attempt to donate time to teach a class. In April, my mother and brother waited two hours before being allowed into the visiting room. This past week, three of my college professors had to wait an hour before they were allowed in to teach our classes. Feel free to edit my writings however you see fit. Any feedback on how I can produce better articles in the future would be greatly appreciated. Thank you for your time and ministry.

Sincerely,



Daniel Pirkel #677844
Richard A. Handlon Correctional Facility
1728 West Bluewater Highway
Ionia, Mi. 48846