

Prisons have become warehouses while education and reform have fallen by the wayside. What can be done to correct this negative imbalance?

2015

Officially, the penitentiary has existed since the 19th century although human beings have imprisoned one another since the beginning of recorded time. The concept of the penitentiary was invented by Pennsylvanian Quakers who chose the word from the Latin *paenitentia* which literally means repentance. This technique of restoring the criminal consisted of isolation with little more than a Christian Bible. Although modern institutions provide various creature comforts and are presumably less draconian than their Quaker templates, **a definitive method of rehabilitation has yet to be invented.** In other words, we have come a long way but progress remains elusive. A comparison can be drawn to the military industrial complex. Modern warfare is obviously more sophisticated than even half a century ago yet humankind is no closer to achieving peace.

For the purposes of this essay I have used the term 'prison' to refer to any institution where people are imprisoned for criminal convictions. This includes any camp, farm, jail or center which fits the description.

Not only have prisons become warehouses, Corrections has become Big Business. Prison Industries exploit cheap labor practices without offering incentives such as paid sick leave, vacations or a retirement package. Furthermore, skills acquired prior to prison are not encouraged as most prisons have a "No Business" rule which prevents them from entering into unauthorized contracts. It is ludicrous to expect one to achieve rehabilitation if they are not allowed to make a decent living while on the inside.

The vast majority of those detained will see the streets again. They should be treated as such, not as a number but as a future neighbor. Allowing them to engage in the free market economy (while incarcerated) would be a step in the right direction. The freedom to invest, advise and earn should not be compromised by confinement. Education could be offered in the form of

classes on money management and fiscal responsibility. Limited earning potential has always been a hallmark of the system. Not only does this put the prisoner at a severe disadvantage upon release, it denies the victims and the State the right to receive speedy restitution.

Property restrictions and rules against fraternizing also discourage the artistic and intellectual potential of the incarcerated. Not being able to access the World Wide Web or own more than a few books at a time make serious research difficult if not impossible.

Statistics consistently show that prisoners who have a strong support network of friends and family have a lower rate of recidivism. Rehabilitation advocates should then ask why more is not being done to facilitate these relationships? Currently only a handful of states allow some form of conjugal visiting. The "family visiting" programs or states that allow similar practices do so with various stipulations such as denying the privilege to lifers or out of state transfers.

More widely known is the fact that most jails (places where most of the population has *not* been convicted of the crimes which they are charged with) allow only brief no- contact visiting and notoriously place unreasonable restrictions on correspondence. This includes limiting the number of pages, the rising cost of commissary purchased envelopes or restrictions on photographs considered sexually explicit or too revealing. The prisoner's capacity to love may not be limited but their means for expressing it certainly are.

*In conclusion, we must look at the apparent character of the human psyche. Not just of the criminally minded but human nature as a whole. Our inclination towards greed, lust, malice and adrenaline inducing addictions transcend age, gender or social class. Our motivations, whether in life or in crime remain essentially the same. **Money and love fuel or motives.** At the risk of sounding inelegant, this author proposes that the very same incentives which inspire crime can be instrumental in prisoner reform.*