

To: APWA
From: Daniel Pirkel
Re: Testimony- How Prison has Affected My View of the Future

Before my incarceration, I was a selfish, egotistical fool. Additionally, my low self-esteem motivated me to personify toxic masculinity. After a series of unfortunate events (including betrayal by the love of my life, and my ex-girlfriend ripping my son out of my arms), I tried to commit suicide five times at the age of 19 years old. I took a bottle of pain killers, attempted to drown myself, and jumped out of my Dad's car at 85 MPH in front of a semi. When these attempts failed, I tried to force the police to kill me by firing a .22 cal. pistol at them. Thankfully, no one was shot except me. The police exercised incredible restraint by relying on mostly nonviolent force, for which my family and I will be forever grateful.

As a result of this incident and my subsequent incarceration, I have changed dramatically. No personal benefit that can come from a life of crime is worth the amount of shame that I brought upon my family and I. I also realized that no matter how slick I think that I am, I will be eventually caught. Therefore, I have completely given up my criminal lifestyle. But what should I do now? Repenting from my criminal behavior is not enough. I must live my life with a purpose. I need to make for the mistakes that I have made, to be of some use to others. That is why I have dedicated my life to help others learn from my mistakes as well as to improving the criminal justice system.

Perhaps I am an anomaly. Maybe most convicted felons don't learn their lesson during the first incarceration. The question is, how much time does it take for people to become rehabilitated? Does it depend on the crime? Yes, but probably not in the way you would expect. Violent offenders actually have much lower recidivism rates than those who are incarcerated for property or drug offenses.¹ However, these people are incarcerated much longer, something that is understandable from a retributive perspective. But is it the smart way to deal with crime? Does long term incarceration actually make society safer? Research indicates that it probably does not.

¹ According to an article called, "*Paroling people who committed serious crimes; What is the actual risk?*,"¹ only 204 out of the 6,673 (3.1%) sex offenders released from 1986-1999 committed another sex offense. An even lower percentage of offenders convicted of homicide reoffended in a similar manner.¹

After psychologically analyzing 28 men that spent a significant amount of time behind bars, Adrian T. Grounds found that long term incarceration is detrimental to people's mental health.² This should be common sense. Put a dog in a cage and poke it with a stick for most of its adult life, and it will never be normal again. While today's prisons are more humane than that, many correctional officers still believe it is their job to punish prisoners. When this occurs for long periods of time, it often devastates their self-esteem, significantly increases their level of hostility and hyper-sensitivity, not to mention their desire to be productive. This means that the violence in prison can be attributed to the conditions of confinement as well as the actors directly involved.

This is something that I can personally attest to. After 11 years of incarceration, my mental resolve to live a clean, productive life has transformed into ambivalence, apathy, and despair. I constantly fight off the desire to give up on going home and sometimes visualize myself telling the parole board that they keep that parole; I'm staying. For what is freedom without hope and dreams? I keep pushing forward by telling myself that I can still make a difference in the lives of others, but it is difficult not to call this a false hope and a lie. If my father died, I don't know what I would do. While I will never again embrace a desire to retaliate against the authorities for what they have done, and are doing to me, it is difficult to avoid the feeling when I win a grievance. I try to live with purpose, joy, and empathy, but I only feel hopelessness. I'm only going through the motions. Are these the normal symptoms of being institutionalized? Or am I just an anomaly?

These feelings are only magnified by the policies, procedures, and negative attitudes of the correctional officers (C.O.s). Often, these things seem to be put in place to purposely irritate prisoners, as some of them are not reasonably related to what is necessary to incarcerate people.³ For example, authorities don't need to scream over the intercom, especially at twelve o' clock in the morning. They do not need to turn on the lights in our rooms at 5:30 am. Prisoners should not have to regularly pick hair out of their food, or have to worry about the

² Grounds, Adrian T. (2005). "Understanding the Effects of Wrongful Imprisonment." *Crime and Justice*, Vol. 32 (The University of Chicago Press). 1-58, 2.

³ This is a standard that federal courts are supposed to use to judge the conduct of correctional officers, rules, and administrative decisions.

C.O.s or administration retaliating against them if they write a grievance. Conditions within prisons can never be respectable unless there are significant external checks on the nearly unfettered power of administrators.

Why should the public be concerned about a prisoner's conditions of confinement? 95% of the people incarcerated today will go home one day. Poor prison conditions reduces people's respect for authority, and being perceived as legitimate correlates more favorably with lower crime rates than "tough on crime" solutions.⁴ Furthermore, those who have been ravaged by their time incarcerated sometimes find themselves unable to function in the environment of the free world. Not only are many unable to receive the training necessary to earn a decent living after their incarceration, but studies indicate that they are also much more likely to exhibit signs of PTSD and antisocial behavior like autocratic leadership and an "culture of honor" wherein people are more likely to respond to insults with aggression.⁵

In addition, the prison system can be changed dramatically without costing the public a cent. In fact, it would reduce costs over time. Currently, 19% of Michigan's budget already goes towards corrections. Perhaps this money should be used for what the Department of Corrections purportedly does: correct. Research indicates that the best way to do this is through rehabilitation. Many statistics prove that education reduces recidivism rates.⁶ On the other hand, tough laws are much less likely to deter crime than the perception that authorities are legitimate. In other words, people respect laws and the authorities that uphold those laws when they are perceived to be fair. However, Michigan has only provided me with janitor training during the 11 years that I have been incarcerated. Everything else that I have taken was taught by volunteers, often without the permission of the authorities (many facilities are unwilling to provide a space to allow prisoners to teach classes, and they even enforce rules which prevent more than six prisoners to gather in one place on the yard).

⁴ Schulhofer, Stephen J., Tom R. Tyler and Aziz Z. Huq. "American Policing at a Crossroads: Unsustainable Policies and the Procedural Justice Alternative." *Journal of Criminal Law and Procedure* 101.2 (2011): pg. 335-374, 338.

⁵ Akers, Ronald L. (1977). "Type of Leadership in Prison: A Structural Approach to Testing the Functional and Importation Models." *The Sociological Quarterly*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (Taylor & Francis, Ltd.). 378-383, 383.
Stangor, Charles (N.d.). *Introduction to Psychology*. (Saylor). 828.

⁶ Lagemann, Ellen Condliffe (2016). *Liberating Minds- The Case for College in Prison*. (New York: The New Press), 126-7.

How do others deal with the "normal" frustrations of prison (bad food, threats of violence, loud, unsanitary housing units, etc.)? Some cuss and throw things at the guards. Others take drugs or attempt suicide (suicide rates in prison are six times higher than the general population⁷). Even if all of the frustrations that come with most prison sentences were mitigated as much as possible, it would still damage people psychologically. Many can't deal with their freedoms being restricted for decades at a time. People naturally want to improve their lives, but prison completely prevents this, sending them into an abyss where many lose themselves. Prisoners are stuck in worst part of their lives, sometimes for decades at a time.

Like most prisoners, the majority of my friends and family have abandoned me and my material possessions were sold, lost, or repossessed. Even when finish my sentence, I must start over from scratch with limited career opportunities. Will I ever "repay my debt to society?" No. Serving time does not make up for the past, and the punishment lasts a lifetime. I will never lead the life that I could have if I had been let out at 25 years old with a truly fresh start. If I had been allowed to, I could have become a cop, a C.O., or a counselor working for the MDOC. We need people in these types of positions that are experienced with what it is like to be on the wrong side of the fence. I may not deserve a second chance, but I believe that it is in society's best interest to give people like me one.

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Date

Sincerely,

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⁷ Jo Nurse, Paul Woodcock, Jim Ormsby, "Influence of environmental factors on mental health within prisons: focus group study" British Medical Journal, Vol. 327, No. 7413 (Aug. 30, 2003), pp. 480-483