

The Criminal Justice System in the United States Needs Reform

No country imprisons more people than the U.S. which, with only 5% of the world's population, houses 25% of its prisoners. One of the primary reasons for this is that the system fails to provide a rehabilitative focus for these prisoners, 77% of whom, in recent history, have been re-arrested within 5 years of release. Ninety percent of those currently incarcerated in the U.S. will be released one day directly back into the community, and most of them will be ill prepared for what they will face.

In the federal system, there is little to no incentive for prisoners to improve themselves. With no parole and only a tiny "good time" reward potential representing 13.5% of their total sentence, prisoners have no reason to apply themselves to anything productive. If they were given tangible incentive in the form of parole for doing things like getting an education, completing job training, submitting to psychological counseling, compensating victims of their crimes and doing volunteer work for the community, many prisoners would take advantage of this to make positive changes in their life directions. The real winners here, even more than the prisoners themselves, would be the communities to which these more effectively rehabilitated prisoners would eventually return.

Building more prisons and continuing to issue long sentences with no parole does not make society safer, it only ensures that the problem will get worse. Prisoners under this current non-incentive based system, for the most part, grow increasingly bitter as they wait out their time and teach each other new tricks of the dubious trades that got them incarcerated in the first place. How can this possibly be beneficial to the communities to which they will one day be released?

Many prisoners – though usually not openly – crave rehabilitative opportunities that would give them a chance to pursue legitimate careers upon release. Support for this mentality, however, is extremely limited in prison. Peer pressure from other inmates is of a dangerous nature and is something that must be more than endured: it must be survived. And the staff is, at best, numb to the overwhelming issue of non-rehabilitation and so, with few exceptions, simply go through the motions.

Prisons here should be places that embrace education and ambitious thinking, and they should provide an environment that encourages it in the prisoners themselves. Progressive job training, education and skills development should be at the core of this culture, with the system taking full advantage at every opportunity of things like apprenticeship programs and free or low-cost online college courses. Only in this way will prisoners re-engage in a positive way with the communities to which they will eventually return.

Implementing a parole system under which early release must be truly earned would save the tax payers tens of millions of dollars every year and allow them the opportunity to re-integrate effectively rehabilitated and productive citizens back into their midst. Recidivism statistics prove that, since 1987 when parole was abolished for federal prisoners, the current system just does not work. And as the government continues to emphasize punishment (which studies consistently prove is *not* an effective deterrent) over rehabilitation, the trends just continue to get worse. The

government owes it to these citizens to implement the type of rehabilitation-focused and parole-based systems used to such great effect in other countries. And they can't afford not to because, with the annual cost at the federal level of housing a prisoner presently ranging from \$31,000 to \$65,000, the current sentencing practices are needlessly costing tax payers billions of dollars that could be more effectively spent on crime prevention and law enforcement.

Education is the key to a healthy society and its economy, and no one can benefit more from that education than those who are incarcerated. By making education and practical job training the cornerstone of a highly selective parole system, the most deserving prisoners would be released and successfully reintegrated to become productive members of their communities.

Re-implementing a parole system that provides motivation for prisoners to achieve re-entry upon meeting stringent requirements after completing 50% (or even less) of their sentence would save money, make the communities safer, and provide a second chance to those who best prove that they deserve it.

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