

Alice Bingner
3744 Dexter Road
Ann Arbor, MI 48103
Phone: 734-665-9760
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Corrections: an Exercise in Futility

Currently, in the United States, it costs upwards of \$50,000,000,000*plus a year to incarcerate more than 2,000,000 men, women and children. And the expense by no means stops there. While 10 percent of prisoners are menaces from whom the public needs protection, the rest would be better served - and so would society - if there were alternative sentencing for non-violent offenders.

If we could imagine a line-up of barred cells containing the entire prison population, they would extend farther than the Mississippi River runs. Picture, if you can, 12,000,000 feet (at six-foot frontage per cage) or 2,172 miles of bars, covering the length of Minnesota, Wisconsin, Missouri, Tennessee, Arkansas and Louisiana. And consider that these 2,000,000 plus represent only 1.5 percent of perpetrators of crimes in the United States. The other 8.5 percent are not caught and convicted. Or they are the rich or famous who serve time ^{with} ~~on~~

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conveniences, a la the high class prison in New York State that houses political celebrity Michael Cohen for the three years he's been confined. We live with the greater share of felons, both unknown to authorities and ignored by lawmakers, on the street. Readers have recently been exposed to many mild sentences for millionaires in political offices. Those punished are isolated from their families, are taken out of production and are scorned as convicts - while thousands of offenders function normally. There has to be a more reasonable way to deal with crime in the United States, for much less cost, not even to mention the humanitarian cost of long term confinement.

Some 60 percent of convicts are addicted to drugs, alcohol, gambling, even to prison itself. They all need help. The kind of help they need does not come from separation. It doesn't come by relieving them of responsibility. Nor from disrupting normal lives with families. It doesn't come either from authorities making every decision for them. Decision-making then becomes a drag: they can't cope with the need outside to decide for themselves. They look to their addictions for relief from responsibility.

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Some 67 percent of the 2,000,000 plus will be back for another term, possibility again and again. Each time the unprepared convict returns, the taxpayer divvies up \$25,000 a year to maintain a cell for him or her. I read a columnist who said that "crazy" means "repeating the same action with the expectation of getting the same results over and over". The prison system, at that rate, is crazy.

Education in prison is frowned upon. Pell Grants, which came from a foundation, not from the State, were discontinued for inmates. A community college in Michigan offered to instruct at no cost to the Department of Corrections and was turned down. Outsiders can buy correspondence courses, but as an inmate moves from one facility to another, his or her books may be held up. Fortunately, a state senator helped me get texts back to my son, and he thrived on the college courses he'd begun at one point, but had been denied in a transfer.

Another young man, whose Indian tribe has paid his tuition, and my friend, his mentor, has bought his books, gave up on what was successful completion of college courses, when he transferred from an institution that cooperated with his education to one which does not. The warden in one facility apparently was pro-education, but the next one was not. His

best opportunity to become a productive ex-convict is that education that is being denied him in spite of his capabilities.

Returnees again get no training to take a job outside. Education inside is simply for a GED. A lack of education, along with poverty, addiction and mental illness are the main causes of crime in the first place. The incarcerated obtain drugs inside. Alcoholics make their own "stills" from fruit and potatoes lifted from the kitchen. If an inmate reforms inside, it's because he or she individually chooses to - not as a result of efforts of the environment.

Some 47 percent of prisoners have a mental illness. Research writer Terry Kupers, author of *Prison Madness* made a nationwide survey to draw that conclusion. While 67 percent of ordinary inmates will return within three years, 80 percent of the mentally ill will be back in less than one. The Michigan Prisoner Re-Entry Initiative (MPRI) says "Each year more than 10,000 prisoners are released; 8,500 of them are paroled and over 1,500 will be returned as parole violators within 12 months of release. More than 3,600 will return to prison within four years for an average stay of two years. Returning offenders cost the State of Michigan millions every year."

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The MPRI says further, "Without intervention, 70 percent of children with an incarcerated parent will end up in prison." The Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC) appears to have adopted the attitude that "every offender released from prison will be prepared to be successful on parole". Nice work if they can get it: without a complete reversal in such values as education, the help with job search and housing is likely to be futile. To use the \$50 plus billion for early intervention and other prevention of imprisonment in the first place, along with reasonable sentencing, the MDOC could set a precedent.

My own son emerged from puberty into the exciting drug scene and was caught up in crimes of petty, non-violence. They were crimes that he could have paid restitution for with a year's wage at McDonald's. Instead he was sentenced eventually to 25-50 years as an habitual and has cost the taxpayers \$625,000 and is not free yet. He has a genius IQ, needed to get an education and become a taxpayer to help confine *violent* people. He's always been more a threat to himself than to the public as are thousands of offenders. He would truly have paid his debt to society, rather than stagnating in the "corrections" system.

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Public protest against warehousing thousands of citizens, who make up a handful of the actual offenders in the United States, and insisting on a more reasonable strategy for handling crime, particularly when the offender is non-violent - not a physical threat to anyone - is the only way we can hope for prison reform. It is the only way to divert the \$50 plus billion wasted now to a productive cause in order to halt the perpetuity of extensive crime here.

I've used round figures to describe the enormity of the world's vastest prison system. Actually the figures fluctuate, always upwards. Data from any year proves that.

While the public prisons cause tax dollars to go up and human suffering to lead them, the private, for-profit prisons in the equation outclass all public institutions in human misery and expense. In as much as private facilities have profit as their goal, they skimp on food, medicinal care, recreation, inmate education and they under-pay guards. The lack of quality officers is obvious in their mistreatment of their charges.

It would seem that the worst criminals would serve their terms in these drastic conditions; not the case at all. There are juvenile private prisons, some for women and private facilities are the dumping ground for undocumented immigrants,

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who may never have committed a crime as such. The present governmental administration favors private over public.

Writer Shane Bauer, as research for an article on the system that was about to be banned by the Obama administration for its overall cruelty and cost, signed on as a corrections officer. He experienced stabbings, lockdowns, an escape, suicides and mutual disrespect between harassed prisoners and officers who had no interest in their wellbeing. His brief, revelatory if precarious term with Corrections Corporation of America (CCA) followed him out of his employment when his reason for it became evident. The gross conditions threatened to make his short time at the Winn private prison even shorter.

I have written for thirty years to a Black Muslim on death row. He has never complained of such terrible conditions as Bauer describes in his expose in *Mother Jones*. Other than the obvious desire to leave death row, my friend Jerry dreads the dimming lights and the sound of executions. He had to bid goodbye to his best friend, Willie Darden, whom he knew was innocent. The white family, at whose house Willie was using their phone (because of car trouble) at the time of a murder, came to his trial to testify. They were not called. Willie was

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convicted. After his death, his accuser casually said, "Well, all blacks look alike to me."

No other country has the death penalty as 22 of our states do. No other country has mandatory minimums which take discretion as to length of a sentence away from the judge. No other country has longer terms for possession of crack cocaine than for powdered cocaine, which are twin menaces. No other country has the recidivism rate that the U.S.A. has. My son continued to break parole and return to prison for 45 years. His sentence of 20 to 25 years was as an habitual, but for all non-violent crimes.

The number of Americans incarcerated has grown from 500,000 in 1980 to more than two million today. Among all countries, the median incarceration rate is 125 prisoners for every 100,000 in population. Japan has 63, Germany 89, England 153. In our country 743 people per 100,000 are in prison and, if we count those also on probation or parole, "the corrections population soars to 7.2 million or one of every 31 Americans" (Bureau of Justice). We incarcerate 25 percent of the world's prisoners while the U.S.A. has only five percent of the world's inhabitants. Are we that much more evil than the rest of the world or what?

Our country has a lot to learn from the incarceration of other countries. Shorter, fairer sentences alone would help reform our system.

There are American women serving life sentences for killing abusive spouses. Their attorneys were forbidden to tell such tales as of one woman coming home laden with groceries to find her husband sodomizing their youngster. When the mother killed the man after the fact, she got life for murder - the little child left in his care, because the provocation of her crime was kept from the jury.

In some states, the annual budget for the Department of Corrections is greater than for education. Lack of education from childhood as well as poverty and substance abuse causes the incarceration rate to soar in the first place. The vicious circle continues as the children of inmates follow suit. It doesn't have to be so.

From day one, education immersion should begin, geared to individual needs: academic, vocational, therapeutic, environmental, nutritional, artistic, physical, mental and spiritual education could fill every waking hour to good advantage, from the inmate who requires the ABC's to the PhD's. In actuality, a few prisoners get menial jobs for a pittance of

pay. In institutions without restrictions against art supplies and craft work, creativity is possible, helpful and reveals tremendous talent, but this does not include all facilities. It should be remembered that imprisonment IS punishment; some other element is needed during the long terms. Especially it is essential for the approximately 47 percent with mental problems. The 23 percent who are sexual offenders and some 14 percent who are murderers each have a unique need. Most will get out at some point and the public will either reap the benefit of their training and therapy inside or will suffer from the lack of it.

While prescription drug addiction is said by the Center for Disease Control to cause more deaths than heroin or cocaine, those users are not candidates for prison. Even more than national and international drug criminals, small-time crack dealers and their customers absorb a disproportionate share of our taxes. Incarcerating the poor not only costs society millions for imprisonment, but in too many instances an auxiliary cost is State care for the families who are left without a breadwinner for years - an amount not figured in the corrections cost. Statistics predict that the children of convicts are destined to become convicts themselves.

Michigan is especially hard hit by Department of Correction costs because it has the highest violent crime rate, along with, ironically, the highest number incarcerated among its neighboring states. This phenomenon is akin to that in Texas, whose death penalty sentencing surpasses that of other states at the same time as its crime rate is also the highest.

The cost to taxpayers runs about \$35,000 per inmate per year to as much as \$85,000 for aged inmates. In the private prisons the cost multiplies. In maximum security the cost is still higher. Since 1980 sentences lengthened with misdemeanors, such as minor drug possession became felonies and paroles became fewer. These costs have continued to rise. In Michigan for instance, the Department of Corrections (MDOC) has the largest workforce of any one state department. Education, roads and health departments suffer for the MDOC expenditures. One third of its annual budget supports the prison system. Michigan is merely a sample of all the states, some with worse, some better, records.

We need to learn the systems of other countries with their reasonable results and follow suit to instigate reform to our futile methods.