

PRISON REFORM

There has been a lot of talk in the news recently about prison reform. Politicians are seizing the opportunity to use this issue as a "platform" to run their campaign on. You would think that because I am in prison and "prison reform" would have a direct impact on me I would be very excited about the prospect of something changing. However, I am not. Why? Because I think that all of this talk is missing some major ingredients.

America has a long history of doing stuff that research and experience show do not work. Just a few examples are: the religious right that preach against sex education because any sex outside of marriage is "wrong", yet their approach has no effect on teen pregnancy or out of wedlock birth rates; the prohibitionist who thought outlawing alcohol would stop the "evils of alcohol" yet an underground black market emerged; the "war on drugs" which has had little to no effect on the drug problem America is facing. It makes me wonder why a country which has such an educated base of people do stuff that just does not work. Stuff that research shows over and over does not work. Well, other than the fact that one professor told me when I was an undergraduate majoring in Human Development.... "People are basically crazy creatures who often do things that make no sense"..... I think that America's moral code and sense of justice is based upon an idea rather than a reality. One could debate forever the examples of how morality and a sense of justice is sometimes not based in reality but this is about prison reform.

Our county has a tendency to enact things for a group of people because we think "this is what the problem is and this is what they need". However, we do this without actually talking to the people who are in need or really understanding what the problem is. How can elected officials really know how to reform the prison problem unless they talk to the people who are in prison? Prisoners need to be asked: "Why did you do what you did?" "If you could have anything you wanted, what would you ask for to make your life better?" "What would you like for your life to be like when you get out?" "What are your biggest fears about getting out?" Because I am a behavioral science person at heart, I have asked these questions over the last 14 years I have been in here and some of the answers will surprise you.

One of the biggest things I hear over and over (and I sometimes feel this way myself) is that there is a sense of hopelessness because you have been convicted of a felony and now you are forever labeled. There is a disconnect with those on the outside. I have described it to a counselor like this: "It is like I am in one of those snow globes where you shake it up and it looks like it is snowing. I want to be on the outside with all of the people who are looking in at me but I am stuck in here and can only beat on the glass to try and get the attention of anyone who might look at the snow globe for a few minutes before they go on with their real life. I am not real anymore". People in here feel like they are in another world and when they get out they will forever be an alien and labeled. So what do these people want? They want to not be treated as a alien for the rest of their life because they had to live in here. Please stop holding it against them everywhere they go. The... "You can't work here if you are a felon, you can't live here if you are felon", etc... All that does is drive those people out of society even more and being "ANTI-SOCIAL" is of the biggest problems with one committing a crime to start with. The attitude I get from a lot of people in here is... Why should I change, society will never accept me. I understand there is a concern with recidivism but if you treat people like a criminal for the REST OF THEIR LIFE, then what do you expect one to be. In psychology I have heard this described as a "self fulfilling prophesy" It is when one is told and believes they are a certain thing they become that thing. If you want people to continue to behave like a criminal it is easy, just remind them treat them like one and remind them everyday that they are a criminal.

Next, the biggest, BIGGEST thing that I personally see as a problem with prison and what should be done is the one size fits all approach. We are not the same. There are troublemakers in here and there are people who follow all of the rules. The problem is the troublemakers and the rule followers all get treated the same. I have been in prison for 14 years. I have never gotten in trouble of any kind. I do not break the rules in any form yet I am subjected to the exact same treatment as all of the other people who fight, do drugs, etc.. There is absolutely no incentive to do the right thing. None whatsoever. If wine is found in the unit, the entire unit gets punished. If someone is struggling with wanting to change his/her life and you are trying to tell them the benefits of doing the right thing, then what is the selling point? I do the right thing and I get locked down at the same time they do every night. I lose my TV just the same as them even when I don't do anything wrong. What do I tell them? Any argument that prison should be horrible and everyone should suffer is overlooking two facts. 1) the punishment is being in here away from your family and everything you love and it is horrible; and 2) While it might feel good to you on the outside to not give prisoners incentives for good behavior because they are being "punished" and are in prison, you are once again ignoring basic psychology and research if you believe this. Almost everyone in here is getting out and if you do not teach them the benefits of doing the right thing then you are going to have people getting out with no experience of why one does what is right.

Another problem with prison is in addition to there not being an incentive to do better in here, there is absolutely no consequence for CRIMINAL behavior. Out there in the free world if you commit a crime you get a criminal charge. Not so in here. It AMAZES me.... Absolutely AMAZES me that one can viciously attack someone in here or they can receive, distribute, and use drugs in here and there is absolutely no criminal charges filed. One would think that the penalty for doing this type of behavior in prison would be far worse than one in the free world but that is not the case. Criminal behavior is everywhere and there is never any criminal charges or consequences for this behavior. This exemplifies what I was talking about in the previous paragraph. Expectations. If you allow one to act like a criminal and expect them to act like a criminal then guess what.....you will get a criminal and you will get the high recidivism rates we see. In a subconscious way, we are telling prisoners they are destined to come back based upon the way society treats them upon release. [Look up the "Brown Eye Experiment". It was on the Oprah show many years ago. It was amazing at how just planting the idea in people's head that brown eyed people were less intelligent, caused more problems etc... actually made those with brown eyes act that way even though it was completely bogus and was just an experiment showing how suggestion and expectation can cloud the truth.]

The solutions? I don't have all the solutions but I do have a few suggestions for anyone that might listen to someone who has lived among prisoners for over 14 years. 1) Provide opportunities for one to be rewarded for good behavior such as the possibility of an honor unit or prison. 2) Do not provide programs that make the public feel good, provide programs that address the personal issues of the prisoners. Having a skill or trade is good and the public feels like this is what the prisoners need but I see something different. I see the need for more psychology courses that teaches the prisoners to fix what is broken in them. To fix their families. To vent and share their fears and concerns about their early life that contributed to them being here and how to live life after prison. 3) Stop allowing prisoners to commit crimes in prison and adopt a zero tolerance policy for crimes in prison. If society does not allow crimes why on earth should a place that is suppose to be rehabilitating them allow crimes to take place with no consequence? 4) Develop some type of advocacy group that can help shape the public's opinion of ex-felons. The media and society likes to focus on the negative. There are a lot of positive things one can find in an ex-felon if there was a source to help promote these things rather than the negative. I guess it is kind of like marketing. Something or someone needs to market the people who have paid their debt to society and wants to return to be a member of that society.

In closing I want to say this. In a society where we are overly sensitive about labels, prejudice, stereotypes and so open about letting everyone have a chance and letting everyone be represented.....why do we still judge someone who has been to prison with such a strong stereotype that we think all ex-prisoners are just waiting to commit another crime? Ponder that.