

On Therapeutic Community

by Trenton Tompkins

Therapeutic Community

The program I completed was called therapeutic community. I was assigned to it, against my will, because I answered "yes" regarding heroin use on a questionnaire.

And already, this brings me to two important problems with our "correctional" system. First, every part of the system rewards deceit. Every question has a right answer, every process needs to be "gamed". There is a time to shut up, a time to deny, a time to lie, and a time to feign contrition. In Pennsylvania, where maximum sentences are double the minimum, convicted persons who are honest and innocent ^(a statistical certainty) can expect to be punished for at least four times longer (the sentencing discretion range TIMES "maxing out") than their more-Machiavellian cohorts. In reality, most do life, as stacked consecutive penalties are dished out to those who exercise their right to trial.

Sociopaths are rewarded by our system, so it is no wonder kids raised in the system often end up sociopaths. While the naïve among them may feel they are "tricking" well-meaning counselors and parole board members, I believe something more insidious is going on. The system needs to protect its narrative. There needs to be witches to hunt, druggies finding Jesus behind bars, and some unrepentant Jeffrey Dahmer types to hold-up as justification for a prison system that has eclipsed our school system.

To promote these narratives, the system rewards, or at least offers to reward, those who say the right things and appear reformed and repentant. Those who will help it justify itself. In Pennsylvania, even weed dealers are expected to "show remorse" to be paroled. And the system needs these narratives, because what it doesn't have is statistics. "Programs" such as Therapeutic Community can be quantitatively shown to not work (the cherry-picked data they are forced to use to show otherwise is laugh-worthy). They survive on the notion that it would be good if programs did work. They are the "Ab Belts" and "Fat Freezers" of ^{state} government spending.

Which brings me to the second problem. During "intake" at SCI Camp Hill, I was asked if I wanted to participate in Therapeutic Community or needed drug treatment. I said no (this was 2 ½ years after my arrest and almost 4 years after I last used heroin). I was transferred to SCI Fayette, where my classification was "manually overridden" by a prison counselor to now require Therapeutic Community. No reason given, just decreed upon my arrival.

Why? If you guessed "money", I'd say your right. If you didn't guess money, I would encourage you to Google Fayette County, Pennsylvania. I am the economic activity in this region. Requiring completion of the four-month program means longer total imprisonment for those already near or passed their minimums (I was). That's thousands of dollars every month to Fayette County.