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4993 Word Essay

At the age of sixteen I was incarcerated for First Degree Murder and later sentenced to 77-years in prison. There seemed to be little consideration of the affects it would have on a teenager to be housed with adults.

Fortunately for me I was a fighter. There is a strange unwritten rule in prison that if somebody is willing to stick up for himself from day one then other prisoners will be willing to help him. If you don't stand up for yourself then you are left to the wolves.

It was in this environment that I grew into an adult. I often wonder how I ended up becoming the person that I am today. I have a strong desire for reformation of the current prison system. Unfortunately the ideas being given the light of day that are geared towards reformations are mostly from people who haven't even been inside of a prison, whether working or incarcerated.

I decided to change my ways six years ago and stuck with it through personal determination. Before that time I had been to 'the hole' over twenty times, with over forty major infractions. Rebelling against the system was a form of relief for me. Words cannot describe the mental and emotional anguish that comes with having no foreseeable relief in the form of a release date.

I still struggle to this day. I am a firm believer that the key to life is hope. If somebody, even a prisoner, loses hope then what remains of life? I watch and experience inmates receiving inhumane treatment from officers and turning around and treating their fellow prisoners inhumanely. To prevent myself from rambling I will address relevant issues and list my solutions to these problems.

How to control violence:

Before figuring out how to control violence we have to find the root causes of violence in prison. For example;

1. **Image:** In prison perception is everything. If somebody does anything to violate another whether it's verbal or on principle such as not paying a debt, prison politics mandate that retaliation must occur. If retaliation does not occur then the one who doesn't retaliate will be less respected and likely challenged by others.
2. **Vengeance:** These are times when things spill over from the streets. These often become recurring violent incidents within the prison.
3. **Missiles:** In any organized group there are going to be people (usually lower level) whose "duty" it is to attack others on command. These individuals are commonly referred to as missiles.
4. **Retaliation:** When somebody does anything to violate an individual or group in another place (prison) retaliation is often carried out on behalf of those who aren't capable of doing it themselves.
5. **Sex Offenders:** Many times people with sexually based crimes are attacked. The more vile the crime usually determines the viciousness of the attack.

6. **Snitches:** Informing on other criminals is considered treasonous in prison. An informant is guaranteed to become a social outcast.

7. **Mental Breakdown:** Prison is extremely stressful. On more rare occasions people decide to take out their built up frustration and anxiety by committing random or excessive violence against others. Random violence being when they take out their aggression on people who have not done them wrong, and excessive violence being when they go to an extreme level of violence in relation to the incident that sparked the violence.

This is only a small sample, but I will be able to show my methodology of bringing these problems which lead to violence more under control. The key is that the cure is in the opposite of the poison. If someone got bit by a snake they would need antivenin which is made from venom itself. Keeping this in mind we must remember that any behavioral reformation carried out in prison must have inmates as a part of the process.

❖ **Image:** I've personally witnessed many times where somebody doesn't even want to retaliate due to the issue being something not worth committing a violent act over. They resort to violence as a means of self preservation. The things that can lead to violence must be addressed. Gambling and people not being able to pay their debts is a major one of these circumstances. Most of the time the prison administration doesn't look at gambling as being a big deal, but a good portion of the violence within prison stems from it. Prison officials will take violent acts seriously without taking what leads to that violent act seriously.

Image goes much further in prison. Something as simple as calling somebody a punk, or a bitch can in many cases lead to somebody being stabbed. This is what's taught in prison, that's what is expected of you to do. If someone disrespects you on that level then it's unacceptable.

Solution: Inmates can never be expected to behave themselves like regular human beings if they are not treated like human beings. Being stripped of our identities and shamed by our actions we adopt our own ways of coping. Our own ways of feeling better about who we are.

We need to feel as if we still exist. Being called by our last names may seem insignificant but it is a way of stripping us of who we are. It's the same reason that they do it in the military. Prison officials have to come to realize that they hold the key to how we act amongst ourselves. When they treat us more like human beings then we tend to act and think more like human beings. When they treat us like scum how are we going to act? Therefore humane treatment is key, coupled with prison officials taking issues such as gambling and even abusive language amongst inmates more seriously. Prison Staff take it seriously when an inmate abuses one of them verbally and this needs to become a standard that is adopted across the board.

- ❖ **Vengeance:** There has to be an intelligence sharing system between the county jails and the prison. Even if everything were to be filtered through the receiving facility so that it becomes a part of the classification process. Find out as much as possible if there are any relatives of the victim at the other facilities within the State.

Solution: It is key that there are some type of classes set up that counter the cycle of vengeance. If individuals are made aware of their own actions and

how they effected others then maybe they will be more willing to forgive others who have done them wrong. For example I heard about a program in Texas where Inmates had to act out their crime both as the active party and then play the role of their victim. I believe things like this will help people realize their own faults and be more forgiving. Of course classes such as this must be based on a free will system. There should be some advantage to taking the class though, outside of moral benefits.

- ❖ **Missiles:** The only way that this will be brought to an end is to take organized groups more seriously and dismantle them. When Officials turn a blind eye to gangs and act as if they do not exist at a particular facility then they will flourish.

Solution: Crack down on gangs. Don't allow for groups of more than four to gather outside of religious services. Have an intelligence program that will crack down on organized groups. Pressure the weak to tell on the stronger members and let it be known that there are many informants amongst the gangs. Make the punishments for being a leader of these groups too severe for anybody to want to step up to a leadership position.

A lot of gangs have a counsel system to avoid centralized leadership. During orientation Inmates should be informed that anybody known to be participating in this type of counsel will be treated as a gang leader and given the harshest penalty. Follow up so that these don't just become hollow threats.

- ❖ **Retaliation:** This falls into a similar category as gang activity. The only solution to this would be to make the penalty so severe that it works as a deterrent.

Note: If the penalties are not known then they will never work as deterrents.

- ❖ **Sex Offenders:** Special treatment shouldn't be regulated towards them. What I mean by this is that somebody assaulting them shouldn't receive harsher punishment than if they were to assault somebody else. I've seen sex offenders try to taunt people in places like IMU where others couldn't get to them and I believe that under protection some of them would try this in the living units.

Solution: The only solution would be to have the punishment for violence within the prison be severe and inform people of this. If the punishment isn't worth the action against the individual, then and only then will it work as a deterrent.

- ❖ **Snitches:** One of the things that I've seen is Correctional Officials giving up information about who is telling them the happening within the facility. In other words they're snitching on the snitches. Snitches in prison aren't like law abiding citizens on the streets trying to do their duty to society and improve law and order. Snitches in prison are mostly people with their own agendas seeking to accomplish something for themselves. In any case, Corrections Officials must stop giving up these people or face being fired from their jobs. They obviously take it way too lightly in many cases. Especially in out of the way facilities, like Clallam Bay and Walla Walla in Washington State, in my opinion.

- ❖ **Mental Breakdown:** Stress is a mainstay in prison. This stress can obviously lead to violence.

Solution: Develop more outlets as well as coping groups within the prison so that Inmates can and will address the things that cause stress to build up. Also have meaningful measures of addressing things within the facilities where it is more than just procedural for the Staff, such as the Grievance process. (Part of the problem for the grievance process I believe is that people abuse it and in turn the grievance staff do not take legitimate grievances as serious.)

Coping with Incarceration:

There are many things that come with being incarcerated that most inmates don't discuss. The mere feeling of being tormented by your own circumstances rarely comes up in conversation. If these things were to be put out in the open more then people might be willing to address them on a larger scale.

Personally I have seen it to where people are willing to talk about positive change and a lot of other meaningful things in a one on one conversation. We need to make this socially acceptable in prison though. One way to do this is to develop a system that is conducted by people from outside of the facility. Create a 'sample group' of individuals that have *influence* in the prison and let them know that they were recommended to be a part of this program. Don't tell them by who.

The program's coordinator has to let them know that this program is all about benefiting them. They will be needed to work out the kinks in the program and then other people in the prison will be pulled in and the program will grow from there. This will have them feel as if the program is theirs. They will want to sell it to others in the population as a good thing and they will have a desire to see it become successful.

There has to be a realistic system in place. It will be essential that there is no down time in this group. Down time is almost guaranteed to lead to pointless discussion followed by negativity. Every session must be interesting and there has to be the appearance of there being

not enough time to quite get everything accomplished. This will leave them anxious and wanting more until the next session.

A group such as this should be geared towards how to improve their lives both within prison as well as on the streets. With prisons having varied populations the curriculum should be varied as well. The speaker can give personal experiences from his life that will have people relate to him. When somebody speaks on anything then the first thing we usually do is try to relate it to our own lives. *"What have I experienced like that?"*

Connections have to be made and a thorough curriculum has to be developed. This should be done in unison with people who have been incarcerated and people who are professionals in certain fields. One of the keys will be not to make anything too complex as it is likely to cause you to lose more people than you gain.

Having a group like this with workshops can be a key to the missing link of inadequate education within the prisons. There should be a standard curriculum as well as guest speakers who are willing to come in for voluntary seminars.

What doesn't work?

Any system that is based on coercion will never work. People want to feel like they have a choice in what they are doing. Especially in prison when you have so many of your freedoms stripped away from you, there is a strong desire to want to feel like you have some type of control over something. Programs that offer incentives are good in part, but if the people are only doing them to receive the incentive then the sincerity needed to make the program successful will never be there.

I can also say from experience that treating people inhumanely doesn't work nor will it ever work. A lot of people in prison have never been taught how to act. Coddling grown men is never ideal, so that is not what I am eluding to. I am simple saying to create a more humane environment within prison. Being separated from society and our families is punishment enough,

how is degrading us and stripping us of our individuality going to make us ready to reenter society and be "normal"? It isn't.

What does work?

The cure is in the opposite. I can say for certain that what does work is being treated in a manner that I feel my humanity is being recognized. I have personally experience where being treated like a human has led me to want to make positive changes and want to stick with those positive changes even in times of frustration so as not to disappoint those who have treated me decently.

This should be incorporated into any freewill based program. People in prison committed acts in violation of the ethics of society and deserve to be punished for them. The question is, "*What is the punishment?*" I don't believe that most people can answer this. Is it *being in prison*, or is it *being treated lowly on top of being in prison?* What is the real punishment? I believe that in order for this to be answered those in authority need to come up with a set standard of what the means of punishment is going to be.

What is the objective of the prison system? If it is to make the people who went in as criminals become more in line with law abiding members of society then what are the means in which prison officials are going about trying to accomplish this. On top of this I will ask a question that I was once asked, *What do they want out of us?* I got so much out of this one question. What do they want out of us? If they are not clear or unsure of this themselves then how can we live up to a standard that hasn't been set? How can we strive to reach a goal that hasn't been created?

So if the Department of Corrections in any State is going to be successful in any reformation based program then they need to lay out clear standards of both *What is punishment?* as well as, *What is the standard, behavioral or otherwise, that is expected out of somebody before they can be considered reformed?* And if they reach this standard will they be treated like a regular human being?

These questions aren't just being asked in an attempt to point these things out. They are things that we truly need to find answers to before creating a realistic system that works. If the goal is to bring convicted felons into conformity with the acceptable standards of a given society then it is essential for there to be a realistic system in place that is transparent and easy to follow for those running it. A system that is carried out throughout a State's entire prison system, only modifying it when necessary to suit the needs of a particular facility.

I cannot stress enough that a part of this system has to be treating people like human beings. Not coddling, but respecting. Treat the men in prison as they would an individual that they would run into in society. People might not take to this treatment right away but over time it will wear on them. Just as the negative treatment wears on people in prison in a negative manner, respectful and humane treatment will definitely wear on them in a positive manner.

Medical Treatment:

Medical treatment in prison is probably some of the worst in the country. I can understand members of society not caring much for how somebody in prison is receiving health care when they may be struggling to receive it themselves, but in our country we treat animals found in the streets to a humane standard as far as health care is concerned.

It would be one thing if inmates could afford to buy into their own medical plan but they can't. Most prison jobs in the State that I am incarcerated in pay around 30-40 dollars a month starting off. This is for a full time job. Needless to say we would never be able to pay for health care. Unfortunately the Staff working in prison hospitals aren't necessarily the top of the line in the medical field. Most good doctors and nurses are working at real hospitals, that's just the truth of the matter.

What most taxpayers would probably be appalled at is the fact that medical staff in prison repeatedly cost taxpayers more money by "trying to save money". This is done when they do not treat an individual for something in the manner that it is needed to be treated. The medical issue

that the inmate is facing then worsens and it reaches a point where the prison has to send him to an outside hospital and it cost the taxpayers many times over the expenses that it would have cost to treat it in the beginning.

It would be like taking somebody who had been struck by scrap metal from a bomb in war and just wrapping it up in a bandage and giving him some ibuprofen (prison's cure all). Over time the person gets an infection and they wait and wait until it becomes gangrenous. Eventually the problems gets too far out of control and the person has to go into emergency surgery and loses one of his limbs. All of this could have been prevented by just removing the scrap metal in the beginning and disinfecting the wound and keeping in clean, but this was too much trouble for them to want to go through. Either way they get paid, and remember that if they were top of the line professionals they probably wouldn't be working in a prison in the first place.

Though this may sound extreme, it is my way of illustrating how ineffective the current medical system is in prison. Along with this there is the problem of individuals receiving the wrong medications for what is wrong with them when they do receive medical treatment.

- ❖ **Solution #1:** Enter all inmates into a collective medical plan which insurance companies will compete for the contract. Forbid doctors and nurses working for the prison to carry out the practices of overcharging the insurance companies which are paying for the care. That means no \$80 Q-tips or anything else that regular hospitals fraudulently charge people for through their insurance companies.

- ❖ **Solution #2:** Hold all medical staff accountable for their performances within the prison. Have yearly audits of their medical records at each facility. If it is found that they are overcharging the insurance company or are providing inadequate health care services, fire them.

- ❖ **Solution #3:** Aggressively attack, through treatment, infectious diseases in the prison system. I don't know the exact figure but I have heard estimates as high as 75% of the prison's inmate population being carriers of an infectious disease. The cost may be high to treat them but the consequences of them spreading a infectious disease is even higher.

- ❖ **Solution #4:** Charge fraud fees to inmate who abuse the system. People have to be made aware that these fees exist. Sometimes inmates will sign up for sick call or other medical services for fraudulent reasons.

- ❖ **Solution #5:** Double and triple check the medications being issued to an inmate to insure that he is being issued the proper medication for the problem that he is dealing with, and stop using ibuprofen as a cure all when it's not. (smile)

There obviously would have to be a more thorough study of all the things wrong, as well as what is working, with the current prison health care system. This is only a brief glimpse of some the things needing to be addressed. An in depth study should include interviews of inmates as well as staff. I don't know what type of challenges the staff are facing in this area and I don't want to be unfair to them either.

Re-Entry:

Re-Entry is something that needs to be addressed in a two part system. One part on the inside of prison and the other on the outside of prison.

On the inside what is needed are;

1. Trade programs that can be used by the inmate in the area in which he will live upon release.
2. Human Relations classes to improve an individuals abilities to work with others in a productive manner.
3. Information on what is to be expected out of them upon release and what they are realistically going to face.
4. How to go about getting the things that they will need such as an ID Card, residence, job.
5. How to balance a budget.
6. A class to put things in perspective. A lot of people in prison are there in relation to money. If it can be pointed out to individuals what they are missing in prison and what they could have accomplished over their stay in prison then this is one tool. Another thing would be to have a guest speaker, former inmate, speak on how he went in and out thinking that he had the way each time to get away with committing certain crimes only to come back to prison. Try to find somebody who finally got the point and was successful at staying out. Another tool could be to put things in perspective by showing them what they currently have. A cell, one man two man whatever. Contrast this with a small apartment or trailer home and point out to them that even with a very small amount, if you are free and poor you will still have much more than you would in prison. The problem comes in looking at what other people have and getting impatient. If they have been in prison for any amount of time then it is to be expected that they will not have a lot of things that other people have and they will need to have a little patience in acquiring them.
7. Teach people what type of benefits they have available to them upon release and how to go about receiving these benefits.

8. Life skills are essential. A lot of people in prison have not been taught them before. This is something that some people might laugh at but it is still necessary that people acquire them before being released from prison.

The system that is set up on the streets will need to be largely based on a support system. Not a hand out system, but a support system. When people have been away for a while they are going to be looking for something, anything that will bring them some sense of comfort. There has to be a network in place to address certain areas.

1. **Employment:** Needless to say somebody needs a job in order to be successful. Jobs aren't always going to come easy, so I believe that it would be good to try and create a network of businesses or franchises that would be willing to hire former inmates if they have completed a certain program in prison that is geared towards rehabilitative change. A program that had strict standards and held its participants accountable.
2. **Housing:** Housing is something that is hard to come across for some people coming out of prison. They may have had their only means of support die while they were incarcerated or a variety of other possibilities. I believe that this can be resolved by having housing available through a subsidized renting process. If graduates of a program are allowed to move in rent free for the first couple of months with steady increases in rent from there until a 6-month or 1-year mark then this could provide housing to a number of men under one roof. Individuals living there would have to go by house rules and complete task that is expected of them while they were housed there. This could include

drug test, curfews, as well as chores. There should be a sense of a positive living environment for them to come into.

3. **Associations:** I know from personal experience that who you associate yourself with can have a dramatic impact on your behaviors. If there could be something in place for people to have positive associates in the form of a group, organization or anything along those lines I know that it would help tremendously. There has to be an overall system that is all tied in together. People who complete this system should be encouraged to stay in this system even if it's on a volunteer basis. The more volunteers that you have for something the less time each person needs to volunteer.

4. **Treatment:** With over 20% of the prison population suffering from some form of substance abuse problems then it is essential for them to be part of a treatment/support system. This could be accomplished with something as simple as N/A or A/A.

5. **Community Service Projects:** Doing time is punishment enough. Community service shouldn't be a form of punishment but more of a symbol of giving back. By doing things for the community people will have a sense of purpose. It feels good to do for others and this will project former inmates in a different light. The community needs to be given back to and society needs to acknowledge that former criminals can change their ways. This will be a good way to work towards both of those goals at the same time. Part of the collective efforts at creating true and lasting change.

Summary:

In summary I believe that we need to break through peoples skepticism about whether or not these reforms are even possible. I know for certain that I could have done a better job at writing this essay but I am burnt out myself. A project such as this deserves more than two days of my time but I have seen so many of my efforts seem fruitless that it's hard to be motivated.

Knowing that this is the case with myself how about the countless other people who once believed in change and have given up since. How do we motivate them to get back on board so that we really can make a difference and create momentum towards the changes that we need. If people don't believe in something then it will show in their actions. I don't want to focus my efforts on those who don't truly want change, I want to focus my efforts on those who are sincere or are more conducive to develop sincerity for the overall vision of good.

One of the ways that I like to break down the prison population is to separate it into three groups. The first group being individuals who have a desire to change and will bring about those changes with or without the help of others. The second group being those individuals who would change if they had the means and the proper support system to help them and encourage them to bring about those changes. The last group being those individuals who don't want to change, nor would they change even if given the support and opportunities to change. These types are the poisons to the others. Rather than focusing on them, I believe that the main focus should be on the first two groups. The only amount of focus that we should direct towards the third group is to determine the means of preventing them from discouraging those who do want to change from carrying out and sticking to the changes that they have committed to doing.

Being in the belly of the beast is discouraging. A system wide overhaul would be extremely helpful in making change more bearable within prison walls. Making change a normal way of doing things and thus easing the strains that it currently causes on the individuals psyche.

By,

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