

Corrections in Michigan- All stick and no Carrot

As it currently stands, Michigan is one of the few states in the country that does not offer state prisoners any type of "good time." That is, incentivizing prisoners to take classes and to improve their behavior in exchange for reducing their sentences. Instead, Michigan relies entirely on the threat of punishment to dissuade future criminal behavior. This contradicts common sense as well as science. Many scholarly journals have found that reinforcing good behavior is more effective than simply ruling through fear of retribution. According to Rand meta-analysis, education programs in prison reduce recidivism by 43%. However, "tough on crime" policies and a lack of funding prevent prisoners from taking educational courses. In order for people to invest themselves in something, they need a reason, an incentive to do so. Why take a class that provides no real world benefits? Most of the criminal justice literature I have come across recognizes the importance of reinforcing good behavior. If our goal is to protect society, our priority must involve changing behavior. While the punishment of incarceration helps people to see the consequences of their actions, punishment alone creates diminishing returns.

America's struggle with Covid-19 shows us people do not follow laws simply because they fear the consequences. Instead, society depends on voluntary compliance. People resent laws they perceive to be unjust, and will flaunt them, like mask mandates. If people had similar views toward other forms of illegal activities, society would fall apart. Research indicates that this compliance depends on procedural justice; that is, how legitimate the rule is, how fairly it is enforced, and how legitimate people consider those enforcers. If authorities punish people too harshly, they will begin to resent the authorities, undermining their legitimacy, which scholars have tied directly to voluntary compliance. Instead of embracing harsh sentences for the sake of retribution, we should focus on the future. 95% of people eventually return to society, and sending home broken people is counter productive. Even though America sentences criminals to twice as much time as Europe, their recidivism rates are nearly half that of America's. The extra cost of these long sentences could be poured into schools, stopping the school to prison pipeline. Additionally, we need to think about what we are doing by throwing people in cells without any opportunity to work toward changing their situation. Even if originally repentant, a person treated poorly for 10 or 20 years is more likely to become bitter, antisocial or even vindictive. Instead, we need to harness

people's desire to improve their lives and encourage them to take classes that will renew their mind.

Nonetheless, victims and communities should have confidence that people just sentenced for heinous crimes will not be immediately released. People must be held accountable. Most proposed "good time" legislative in the last 20 years have attempted to cut people's sentences so severely. Even if it did, the parole board still has the power to deny parole, which they should do if a person's behavior in prison indicates that they could be a threat. Too often, I have seen the most sincere people rotting behind bars while jerks go home. This has to do with society's stereotyping of violent offenders. Contrary to "common sense," the most violent offenders are actually the least likely to reoffend. Murderers have less than a 1% recidivism rate while sex offenders have less than a 2% rate. Violent crimes are highly circumstantial and heinous crimes impact offenders psychologically, making them more open to changing their lives. Treating such individuals less harshly also has not been shown to increase these rates either. In recent years, the Michigan parole board has been letting people out of prison much closer to their earliest possible release date (ERD), and recidivism rates have dropped from 54% to 28%. This may also be do to the Michigan Department of Correction's (MDOC) new emphasis on programming as well as not violating people's parole for petty reasons.

Aside from the logical reasons for encouraging prisoners for good behavior, we can send the message that these individuals have value, and can benefit society if they were to only change their behavior. As a current prisoner, good time would change my life, potentially allowing me to accomplish my dreams of becoming a published author and full-time prison policy advisor. I want to help the society that I once harmed, which is why I want to share what I have learned from my mistakes as well as my experience in prison. I am about to finish my bachelor's degree in Faith and Community Leadership through Calvin University, and God willing, I am going to earn a Master's degree in criminal justice. I plan to work inside or outside of the prison context to improve the system so that we reduce crime as well as its consequences on our communities.

We need to take a smart on crime approach. We've seen the tough on crime policies fail for over 50 years, and people have started changing their views. Even so, without giving incarcerated people some sort of incentive and ability to change their circumstances, criminal justice reform is simply lip service.