

WHY ARE THEY HERE?

BY DENNIS MINTUN

I have been in prison for almost 18 years now. During that time, I have seen a lot of injustice, a lot of abuse, a lot of wrong doing on the part of inmates and staff. But the biggest wrong that I've seen is the mass incarceration of people who don't belong in prison.

I'm talking about people with various mental illnesses. Over, and over again, I've seen people put in prison for "crimes" that wouldn't even warrant a ticket in much of the world. Why? Because "the powers that be" don't want to have to deal with the real issues – mental health.

From "minor" mental illnesses like mine (Aspergers and PTSD) to the more severe, like schizophrenia, it has become in modern times, easier to lock people away than to even attempt treatment. Once they get to prison, there is very little help.

At one point, really struggling, I decided to visit the prison psychiatrist. She talked with me for about 3 minutes, then asked me, "What do you want me to do for you?" When I told her I wasn't sure, she asked what drug I'd like her to prescribe! There are many examples of people who are here that make me shake my head in wonder.

One young man, about 22 years old, has very advanced cerebral palsy. He's in a wheelchair, and cannot even speak coherently. Apparently, someone sent him some pictures of underage porn. The pictures were discovered on his computer by his case worker, and he

was sentenced to 10 years in prison. I'm not saying the pictures weren't wrong, and I don't know if he solicited them or not but this young man can barely move on his own. He is certainly not a threat to society.

There are a lot of ways he could be punished for his crime other than being put in prison. Yet, here he is for the next 10 years.

Another case is an inmate with bipolar disorder. He got into an argument with a police officer and raised his hand towards the cop. He was sentenced to 3 years in prison for "assault." Once here, he was put on a "cocktail" of drugs that literally made him go off the deep end. He got out of prison and came back almost immediately. It seems his doctor on the streets wouldn't give him all the drugs he was getting in prison. Therefore, in an effort to "self-medicate" he tried meth – and was arrested.

As the readers of Spotlight on Recovery may know, I am a suicide watch "companion." As such, I have a lot of interaction with people who have various mental illnesses. I think I can say, with confidence, more than 90% of them would be far better served getting proper psychological counseling and proper medications than being put in prison – often for many years.

I don't know what all the answers are – but prison is not it!