

When I used  
to blog from 2001-2010,  
this was the most common  
question, and the most react  
of my posts. I have much  
more to share, if interested.

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## The Most Common Question

After writing on prison blogs for about 8 or 9 years, one of the most common questions that people ask is this; Do inmates really need money, and if so, how much?

Let's try to address this in this essay, because there are different ways to look at this. Let me try to give you the answer in two forms; that from the outside, and that from the inside.

I have to first establish the basic truth of the answer, so that even those who are not sympathetic to inmates in prison can understand that there are often two ways (at least) to look at a situation, but if you are not sympathetic to the situation, you may not fully understand it.

First, do inmates REALLY need money in prison? To the casual reader, the answer is quite obvious, and to that I will lend some credibility to it.

Inmates, in general, DON'T need money. After all, they are given three meals a day, more than most people in the country. They are given room and board, free of charge. They have a bed to sleep in, they have clothes on their back, and during inclement weather, they have heat or air conditioning (on many compounds) and shelter.

Inmates also have access (though severely limited) to medical help. they don't have to pay for any medicine if needed, and if they go to the hospital, that is also taken care of.

In the most general of terms, in an inmate is taken care of to the fullest. In fact, inmates in this country live, while in prison, MUCH better than any person in a third world country. As one person said, "we live like kings while in prison".

So why should we care if inmates get money or not? Why is this so important to anyone? Why then should inmates even have consideration to have money while doing time? Ought not that be additional punishment to them for breaking the law, and being found guilty of their charge?

On looking at this from the outside, it would seem to be an "open and shut" case. Do inmates really need money...no.

But.....

Let's look at this from another point of view, from the view of those who ARE sympathetic to inmates. This is the reason for the essay anyway. In the 8 or 9 years I have been writing on prison-support sites, this is by far the most common question asked by readers, and loved ones of those with people in prison.

So let's address this from their point of view. Do inmates REALLY need money? My answer is this...yes.

Why is this? As an inmate, having done (and doing) time, it is critical to the development of hope to an inmate to have some form of control over his life, while doing time.

One of the greatest helps an inmate can have while doing time is, as the saying goes, "don't let time do you". What this means is that while you are doing time, to focus on the things that help you do the time faster, while also keeping hope that no matter how things look, there is always a chance for things to turn around for the better.

You cannot know how much stress goes through an inmate in the course of a day, much less a week, a month, or a year. Most inmates come into the system under great stress, which is why so many have high-blood pressure.

What is amazing about this is that most prisons don't even acknowledge that stress is a heavy factor in inmates with high-blood pressure. If I may, let me give you an example:

When I was picked up by the Federal Government, I was taken from my home county to Raleigh, North Carolina. In that holding cell, full of inmates, I had many things going through my head. My future seemed bleak, and hope running down the drain.

As routine procedure, the county jail has every new inmate visit the nurse, to get basic health information, which includes checking blood pressure. On the first visit to the nurse, she checked it and told me she wanted me to come back later, in about 15 minutes or so.

After 15 minutes or so, I went back, and she checked it again, and asked if I had any history of high blood pressure in my family, of which I said "no". She said my pressure was a little high, that maybe it was because of the stress. So she told me to come back in another 15 minutes, because the blood pressure wasn't going down... rather up.

So I did... and it was even higher. I asked her in jest if this was a concern... she said it was. She had to give me a drug called Clonidril to help me.

I felt fine, outside the extreme stress I was going through, but because of that my blood pressure had gone up. My situation of being arrested by the "feds" had caused a spike in my blood pressure... as I might imagine it to be for most inmates.

Now, considering that, how many inmates in prison live under very stressful times? Many inmates have been given a LOT of time, some stressed by missing family, and being put in a hostile environment, having to be mindful of where they are at all times.

In order to make it through prison time, you have to find a way to control the time you are doing. There is a term for those who have been fully indoctrinated into the prison system; it is called "institutionalized".

When you are conditioned to do everything based on ONLY prison rules, then you have lost control of your time; the prison now controls your time. You eat when they say eat, you sleep when they say sleep, you do everything by prison life.

And while there is some validity to it, what it causes the inmate to do is lose their hope in themselves. In order to have hope, you have to be able, in some form, to have control of your life. You have to believe that no matter how bad things are, you are still in some control of your life.

So why is money so important? Because money gives the inmate the control, or POWER, to still determine how he spends his day. How do they do this? Compare:

An inmate with no money must go to the cafeteria every day to eat. He can't afford to buy food or snacks, so he has to surrender some of his power of choice, lest he starve. It's either that, or become institutionalized and do what many inmates do, which is to pick up a "hustle", or gamble, which actually is a form of hustling.

But if an inmate has money, he has the power to decide what HE will do, rather than what the prison expects him to do. When you have the option to change the normal habit of going to the cafeteria, you are demonstrating a form of power over your life.

If we have, for example, Tuna for dinner, and if I am not feeling all that well, then I can have a choice in what I want to do. If I have no money, I still have to go to the cafeteria, in poor spirits and health, because I can't afford to do anything else.

But if I had a little money, I likely would have gone to commissary (or canteen) and bought snacks or food to store in my locker. Rather than going to the cafeteria, I could simply take care of myself by staying in my cell and eating something I bought.

By doing this, I am taking control of how I do my time, which gives me a sense of hope that even in difficult situations, I still have a say in what goes on. Far too many inmates have completely given up on themselves when they enter the prison system. For this reason, hope is hard to find and harder to sustain.

So, do inmates REALLY need money? Yes, I believe inmates with money maintain a sense of control over their lives, and it gives them a strong motivation and encouragement,. We've not even touched on how much of a

emotional impact it has on the inmate when they get money from a loved one, a gentle reminder that someone out there loves them, and is thinking of them.

When I was in Pitt County Detention Center (PCDC), I used to listen to a local gospel radio station. The announcer there knew that there were listeners from the local jail, and often would play songs for the inmates. But often he would encourage listeners to give a couple of dollars to an inmate, to let them know that someone out there cares about them. Even though I never had any money sent to me while there, I certainly appreciate the idea that someone from the outside cared enough to suggest that others could...or should, at least try to show those that are incarcerated that someone cares about them. Few will argue that nothing speaks louder than money given to a person in need.

How much more so for those in prison? An inmate that gets money in his account can be in better spirits than those who never, or rarely, get money. To be sure, inmates can do their time better if they have control over the things they need to get, or want to get. So yes, inmates need money, for the reasons of control over prison life, and the emotional lift it brings from the person who sent it to them.

Now, the second question: How MUCH do you send an inmate? This isn't nearly as easy to answer, because the answer varies widely.

This answer is completely dependent on what the sender can afford to send. A wife in California with a husband in prison might send \$200 a month; a mother in North Carolina might be able to send \$10 a month. Many can't afford to send anything. So the answer varies depending on what the person is able to send.

I remember a situation from county jail, where I knew of a juvenile, 16 years old, who was in jail with me. His family was very poor, so he never got any money sent to him. I shared what I had with him, even though my mother could only send so much. Still, it was much more than the poor juvenile was getting.

One day, he told me his mom was scraping money together to send him money for canteen. How much?

Five dollars.

This was all she could afford to send, and he was thankful to get that. When he got it, he went out on the "yard" to buy canteen, and one of the items he bought was a 2-pack of Irish Spring, costing about \$3.00. Immediately after he got it, one of the older guys came to him, asking for one. I watched in the distance as the juvenile reluctantly gave him one, then hung his head down as he walked away.

I knew what was wrong; the poor kid didn't want to give that soap, especially since the guy who asked actually

had money; lots of it. I talked to the kid, and he said tome, "my mom scraped nickels and pennies for months to send me \$5, and he (the guy who asked for the soap) asks me for one".

I knew he didn't have much, so I promised him I'd make up the difference, buying him more soap, and giving him more canteen. It was a sacrifice to me, because as I a said, it wasn't like I was getting a ton of money, but to be honest, I felt good sharing with him. I didn't mind giving him of what I had, and it certainly made him feel like somebody cared about him. I might suggest his mother made the greater sacrifice, by giving what she had, even if it was just five dollars. I gave much more, but at least the kid knew how much his mom cared about him.

By this we see that there is no one answer to the question of how much an inmate should, or could, be sent. If you are reading this with a loved one in prison, consider first what you are ABLE to give, not necessarily what you want to give.

Remember, even though you may want to send a certain amount... or even if that inmate SUGGESTS that you send a certain amount, remember you bills; your financial needs must be taken care first. Do not put yourself in debt just to send an inmate money. Remember, he will still eat 3 meals a day, have a roof over his head, have clothes to wear and have access to medical help. In the most basic of terms, he will be fine.

But the amount you send him is based purely on what you CAN send him. I might imagine Oprah Winfrey could likely put more money in my account than my own mother, but whatever is sent, I have to appreciate.

There is so much more that can be covered in this, but if we've covered just the basics, that might help you decide, and to take comfort, that yes, inmates can use money, and yes, it can be most helpful. But send only what you are able. If you do that, you will certainly be able to demonstrate to your loved one that you are thinking of him, while empowering him to control the time he does, until he comes home.

Please feel free  
to write me on  
any questions, or  
more works.

