

From Convict to Citizen: Prioritizing Recovery in Corrections

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In the hallowed halls of justice, a fundamental question reverberates through the corridors of our justice system: What should be the core purpose of incarceration? It seems the answer to this question is simply punishment. The reality of our justice system is one where the revolving door of recidivism churns relentlessly. For many, incarceration becomes a revolving cycle of punishment without end and not only fails to rehabilitate but exacerbates the very issues it seeks to address (Lewis, 2020). The result? Mass incarceration. Prisons filled to max capacity of mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters, all trapped in a system that struggles to provide the essential tools for growth and redemption.

Within those concrete walls, amidst the clang of iron and the echo of footsteps, lie individuals who have, in some way, stumbled along their journey. They are not merely offenders or the numbers assigned to them but bearers of untold potential and untapped resilience. Prioritizing rehabilitation holds a glimmer of hope in the belief of the human capacity for change. It calls for a shift that prisons should focus more on rehabilitation efforts for inmates rather than harsh treatment.

When effectively implemented, rehabilitation programs have demonstrated a remarkable ability to reduce felons from reoffending. By addressing the underlying causes of criminal behavior, such as substance abuse or lack of education, programs can equip prisoners with the tools necessary for a successful reintegration into society. Studies have shown that inmates who engage in structured rehabilitation programs are far less likely to return to a life of crime upon release (Baggio et al., 2020). This means that a substantial portion of the incarcerated population can be effectively reintegrated into society if provided the means.

One of the most compelling arguments for rehabilitation is its role in providing inmates with essential skills and education. Many individuals within the prison system have no way to

secure stable employment upon release. Rehabilitation programs address these issues, ranging from vocational training to educational courses. Research indicates that inmates participating in "correctional education programs have 43 percent lower odds of returning to prison than those who do not" (Prison Reform," 2016). By contributing to a prisoner's personal growth and ability to become self-sufficient, we assist individuals in becoming functioning members of society rather than leaving them trapped in a cycle of dependency while being hidden away from the general public.

With almost two million people in America sequestered away from public life, "the United States has the highest incarceration rate of any country in the world" (Prison Policy Initiative, 2021). The question is, does our current form of incarceration lead to a decrease in criminal activity? According to Damon Petrich from the University of Cincinnati, no situation was found where serving time in prison decreased a criminal's likelihood of committing future offenses (Petrich et al., 2021). Rather than focusing on harsh treatments, which fail to address the root causes of criminal behavior, prisons should allocate resources toward programs that have been proven effective in facilitating successful reintegration. By reducing recidivism, the criminal justice system will enhance public safety long-term and contribute to society's overall well-being.

The essence of public safety hinges significantly on the culture and environment within prisons. The challenge of reintegration is primarily because the conditions in many United States prisons do not effectively contribute to "positive change." (Visher & Eason, 2021). The prevailing philosophy, rooted in punishment, fails to address the underlying causes of criminal behavior and often exacerbates negative behaviors among inmates. The prison environment

serves as a form of retraumatization for inmates while perpetuating an atmosphere of fear and fostering distrust of authority (Bloom & Bradshaw, 2022).

The path we are on now leads to a revolving door of incarceration, release, and return. However, there is another way, a path less traveled but undeniably more promising. Prioritizing rehabilitation is not just an act of generosity but an investment in our collective future and will pave the way for individuals to become resilient contributors to society rather than hardened criminals. This is our moment to redefine the purpose of our prisons, to redefine the possibilities of those within them, and to forge a legacy of justice, compassion, and enduring change.

Resources:

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