



Blank Slate

Jailhouse Blues

Jeffrey Ian Ross 04.18.06, 6:00 PM ET

Keith DeBlasio was 28 when he was sentenced to five years in federal prison for passing \$200,000 in forged cashiers' checks across state lines. He had never committed a violent crime. During his first two months of incarceration, he was repeatedly raped, and his cellmate threatened to stab him. He is now HIV positive. A similar fate befell Garrett Cunningham in 2000. While incarcerated at the Luther Unit of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, he was repeatedly raped by a correctional officer.

American jails and prisons don't work.

Prisons are meant to protect the community, but incarcerating people has minimal effect on the crime rate. Violent offenders are released to make way for nonviolent first time offenders, and most people, if they survive the prison experience, are worse off when they get out. About two-thirds of all inmates released from prisons are rearrested within three years.

Prisons are meant to punish those who have committed a crime, but usually do so with excessive and unintended cruelty. Violence, including sexual assault, is rampant. The unsanitary living conditions, combined with the absence of adequate health and medical care, mean that prison inmates and workers are highly susceptible to life-threatening diseases like AIDS, hepatitis, TB and food poisoning. These problems frustrate inmates and often lead to anger, depression and more violence.

Perhaps more importantly, prisons are also meant to rehabilitate criminals and to keep them from victimizing others in the future. But they rarely succeed at that goal. Meaningful vocational and educational programs are rarely offered. And if they are, prisoners practically have to run an obstacle course in order to get access to or complete the classes.

And yet, despite the failure of our correctional facilities, we're sending more people to them than ever. Over the past two decades, as a result of harsher sentencing laws and the war on drugs, America has experienced one of the largest expansions in its jail, prison and community corrections populations in history. In 2004, according to Department of Justice, approximately 2.1 million people were in jails or prisons, and 4.9 million more were in some form of community corrections (typically probation or parole). That is roughly 3.5% of the adult population. Unsurprisingly, America leads the world in the number of people it incarcerates per capita.

That is why, short of abolishing prisons, which is not as radical as it sounds, we need to examine how correctional facilities in America can be reinvented.

To begin with, the federal government should implement a "No Prisoner Left Behind" program, which requires state correctional departments to insure that all prisoners pass their GEDs and complete one or more technical training courses. Moreover, university education should be facilitated for any prisoner upon request. We know that most inmates have no marketable skills to rely on when they get out of jail or prison. It is incumbent on the system to ensure that these individuals have at least a high school education.

We can also reduce prison populations by transferring many nonviolent inmates to community corrections programs. Traditionally, this has meant probation or parole. But, more recently, these programs have also come to rely on electronic monitoring devices, house arrest, chemical castration and intensive supervision, all of which have generally proven to keep inmates in check. In December 2003, in order to deal with budget deficits, Kentucky started releasing numerous short-timers (those with less than a year on their sentence) who had been convicted of nonviolent crimes. This action had minimal effect on recidivism rates.

Once the jail and prison populations come down to a manageable size, correctional officers should be

encouraged, through educational and salary incentives, to switch from their current roles--in which they basically function like hotel attendants--to becoming true "Rehabilitation Officers," implementing and managing meaningful rehabilitation programs.

Prison systems should be rewarded for their ability to rehabilitate inmates, not for simply preventing inmates from escaping. State corrections departments should be given more money if their released inmates prove to commit fewer crimes.

Of course, it must be understood that some individuals will never be appropriate for release into society. These people must be housed in secure facilities. But jails and prisons should really be reserved only for the most violent criminals.

They should be smaller, too. Large correctional facilities are costly to run, unnecessarily bureaucratic and impersonal. Smaller physical structures go a long way in minimizing the alienation of prisoners and correctional officers alike. The older facilities can be torn down, used as homeless shelters, or as tourist attractions for the public to see the way that we used to do things.

Within the remaining prisons and jails, we need to re-think the way prisoners are housed. Older, more experienced prisoners typically prey on younger prisoners. This leads to both physical and sexual violence. Over time, younger prisoners become socialized to prison life, making it more difficult for them to re-enter society. Violent prisoners who have committed felonies should never be mixed with first time offenders or people convicted of nonviolent crimes.

Over the past 200 years, American jails and prisons have adopted a fortress mentality. Wardens and correctional administrators should be more amenable to continuous inspection, and should even allow the public to take a regular look at what goes on behind bars. This should simultaneously serve as a deterrent against abuse of inmates, and to help "scare straight" juveniles at risk of a life of crime, providing them with a wake up call to mend their ways.

Until American jails and prisons are reinvented, the number of people wasting away behind the razor wire and high walls will continue to grow. They represent the worst of a failed system that foreigners constantly point to as a lack of American ingenuity.

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