



Blank Slate

Ten Alternatives To Prison

Ruth David 04.18.06, 6:00 PM ET

Country singer Johnny Cash immortalized inmates' miseries in his classic song "Folsom Prison Blues." But now, as slammers across the country run out of space and resources, prison officials are feeling pretty blue as well.

Nobody likes these expensive, ugly messes, so why not explore alternate punishments that keep people out of lockup?

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The choices range from probation to public shaming. For drunken driving convictions, some offenders have been made to drive around with signs pasted on the vehicles declaring they've been convicted. Others have been ordered to install Breathalyzer devices that prevent a vehicle from starting if the driver has been drinking.

Legal experts suggest the skills of corporate criminals could be used to offset rising costs in state prisons. "I personally feel we should have a program that lets corporate criminals go to low-income schools and teach," says Stephen Saltzburg, chairman of the American Bar Association's Task Force on Effective Criminal Sanctions. This should be combined with hefty fines for corporate criminals, he says, and schools should seek parents' approval before unleashing criminals on their children in the classroom.

For minors in danger of landing in prison, there might be no better cure than a heart-to-heart talk with convicts. The In My Shoes program in Chicago tries to ensure these adolescents never need to step into the shoes of those who've walked the road to prison.

Prison still seems to be the best bet for violent crimes, defined by the U.S. Justice Department as homicide, rape, robbery and assault. And with a prison population of over 2.1 million, the U.S. relies heavily on prison time to punish criminals and prevent crime.

Of course, the prevention part doesn't seem to be working very well. A 2002 federal study tracked inmates for three years after their release from state prisons in 1994 and found that 67% committed a crime within the next three years.

The Brooklyn, N.Y., district attorney's office is one of the state bodies working on alternatives aimed at reducing high recidivism rates. District Attorney Charles Hynes says the office's star program, Drug Treatment Alternatives-to-Prison, took off after it was redesigned to specifically target second-felony offenders. "When faced with the prospect of mandatory jail time, offenders do not oppose rehab," he says. Statistics show that those who complete the program are three and a half times likelier to get a job than they were before their arrest. And it costs half of what prison time would.

Several other initiatives targeted at keeping people out of prison or ensuring they don't return are community-based, and this is considered crucial to their success. Assistant District Attorney Anne Swern says community-based efforts have helped slash crime rates in Brooklyn, where index crimes--the FBI's most serious crimes--declined by 74% since 1990. And thanks to reduced crime, real estate is booming in the area.

Not everyone is sold on these ideas. Alternatives to prison are workable only in a limited number of cases, and proposed

sentences need to adhere to the federal sentencing guidelines, says U.S. District Judge John Keenan. His alternatives usually are community service and probation.

But in a country with the world's largest prison population, and where some states, like California, are accused of devoting more resources to the upkeep of criminals than on education--alternate punishments are now a question of necessity.

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