

On the Erosion of Rehabilitation

A Writer from Mission Institution

I am a prisoner serving a 20-year-to-life sentence for second-degree murder. I have been behind bars for two decades. I am also a Native American citizen awaiting deportation to be returned to California upon completion of this sentence.

Back in 2001, I went before the immigration board and was told that if I did not fight the deportation, I would be deported at my earliest possible release date which was 2014. Essentially, my day parole would become my full parole, and I would be deported at that time.

In my 20 years of incarceration, I have completed many courses from plain old food-safety to palliative care and even the Inside-Out program offered here in Mission Institution by Kwantlen Polytechnic University (see Kwantlen Polytechnic University, 2017). It was a diverse class. Our paper was on prison myths, and through our exploration, we concluded that Correctional Service Canada (CSC) was not supporting rehabilitation. Subsequently, our aim was to come up with ways that CSC could move away from incapacitation and return to rehabilitation.

I honestly believe I have rehabilitated myself without the help of CSC and taken it upon myself to do something with my time. I have learned a trade by myself and I have completed my correctional plan through my efforts, yet I am still here.

CSC has destroyed the word rehabilitation. I am a prime example of what you should do in prison and I am being punished more so than others because I am a non-Canadian. I keep to myself, yet I am considered anti-social. That is a misconception. I am not being anti-social. I am staying out of trouble. I am living with 96 prisoners who will be your friend one day and your worst enemy the next, and this can get a person seriously hurt. If I stay away, I can show that I am not looking for trouble of any type, and I have taken my crime and rehabilitation seriously.

I cannot get my public safety lowered because of my past crime. It took place 20 years ago. No one contests my release except my parole officer. I have a minimum of 30 certificates to show of my own accomplishments while incarcerated in British Columbia. With the experience I have attained, I can say that the system is failing the public and the 'lock them up' attitude is causing more harm than good.

I consider myself institutionalized, as I have done some time in New York, New Jersey, Florida and California. I am also an ex-gang member

and was also one of the first juveniles to go to the scared straight program in Rahway Prison in New Jersey (see Heeren and Shichor, 1984). I also met Hurricane Carter back then when I was sentenced as an adult. In California, I was held in prisons in Vacaville, Soledad, Susanville, Solano, Norco, and Chino. I am supposed to return to Chino when I am done here.

I share this résumé of sorts not because I think anyone should be impressed, but to show the life I had led, the old man I have become, and the growing up I have begun to do. The reason I say begun is because I am learning every day. Yet I feel it is hopeless and seem to be doing myself more harm than good as my captors seem intimidated by my education, not to mention because I am staying out of trouble and, as such, I must be up to no good. The way the system is organized, one would think CSC's mission is to discourage prisoners from corrective behaviour.

The reason I say this is because I too am a victim of societal change and I am told my past is never going to change and that no matter what, my good behaviour in prison does not matter. I have done many programs in the past 20 years and even though I did not grasp all that was taught, I still have a little bit of something from every program and now I am told the programs did not mean squat.

This being the case, why demand that I take the programs? Is it more for their benefit (i.e. CSC) than mine? Is it to sustain the business of corrections and not rehabilitation? I am in my fifties. I have been inside CSC penitentiaries since the late 1990s. I know what I did was wrong and I cannot for the life of me take it back, and it is a crime that just cannot be ignored. I accept full accountability and responsibility, yet my captors will not allow me to – they say that I show no remorse or empathy for my victim. I have been the ward of the State since I was five years old. I was sent to residential schools in New Jersey and New York. We had our own scoop in the United States, but no one talks about it and finally I felt abandoned and became very bitter. I was in foster care and juvenile detention as the years progressed. I was molested and basically tortured in my childhood years. I was beaten so much that I stopped crying and learned not to give anyone the satisfaction of showing my emotions. This was a learned emotional defense, I shut off their power of emotion.

I later became a prisoner and a parole violator out of the state of California. Upon completion of my sentence, I will be handed over to the United States Border Patrol and the United States Marshals Service, and transported to

the California Department of Corrections. I am told that I need to prepare a release plan, and it needs to be as if I were to be released into Canada as they seem to think I will not be deported, even though the Canadian Border Services Agency had me sign a waiver that guarantees my deportation.

I have written to many halfway houses and was denied at all of them because I am an American citizen whom cannot work in Canada. I was also refused because I have a deportation order. It seems that no matter what I do, I am in a catch-22. How can I prepare a proper release plan if I cannot be accepted in any halfway houses because of the deportation order?

I am also not allowed to transfer to minimum-security because of the deportation order. I am not eligible for escorted or unescorted temporary absences (CSC, 2018a) because of the deportation order. I have no rights in this country and I am not being treated equally as a Canadian prisoner, while being held to a higher standard that interferes with the rehabilitation mandate of CSC (2018b). I am a prime candidate for deportation and the CSC uses it against me to keep me behind bars.

I have been here a long time. I see these kids come and go like clockwork who appear happy to be here. Something is wrong and communities need to get more involved. This locking them up and throwing away the key is the wrong way to go. Prison needs to stop being a business that translates into security jobs for people in government. The kids I meet here are not learning anything except anger and have no pride in anything they do. These prisoners are coming to a community near you. They are angry, not because of what is inside them, but because of how they are taught in here – it is fight or flight in learning how to survive – and it is causing havoc within the system and amongst the staff. Prisoners are becoming more and more confrontational in these conditions, and it is becoming worse. I was in the Mountain riot and I tell you we saw it coming, yet the administration did not take the warning signs seriously. There are many people here in Mission Institution who can be managed in the communities, yet good behavior does not matter, know why? Because many will not return and they do not want that.

Many prisoners kept confined within walls are the ones who are most unlikely to violate their parole conditions, while many of the ones they let out are known to return to prisons. They are also returning many people to prison for violating their parole because of their perceived attitude, not because of committing an offence of some kind. This is all backwards and something needs to change if rehabilitation is to be realized in practice.

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