

The Economics of Educational Rehabilitation

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Washington, D.C., December 1, 1988 - The Criminal Justice system is starved for resources and it is the lack of adequate funding, rather than constitutional safeguards like the exclusionary rule or the Miranda warning, that is hindering law enforcement efforts, according to a study released today by the American Bar Association ...

The report points out that the public should understand and accept that the Criminal Justice system alone cannot eliminate the crime problem. However, the principal complaint of Criminal Justice officials was that "they were not given the resources to do what they could do well ..."

It warns that the answers to this growing problem are not "so simple as merely making more arrests and imposing longer prison sentences" and urges immediate action be taken "to rethink our strategies ..."

Over the past few years, several national surveys conducted by news organizations have reported that an overwhelming number of Americans feel that drugs/crime is the nation's most serious problem. In fact, the fear of crime has been reported to be our nation's most pressing social problem for nearly a decade. Society's demand for action has, in part, resulted in the rewriting of sentencing laws and probation guidelines in most states. This has further resulted in longer prison sentences for those incarcerated, and a bulging, growing, and recycling national prison population.

America is rethinking its prison system. The impetus is cold, hard economics: the growing expense of corrections has ballooned out of control. But in the search for ways to cut costs, corrections authorities also are exploring new means of punishing lawbreakers that may achieve a long-elusive social goal as well: a greater degree of rehabilitation. "We're on a train that has to be turned around," warns Morris L. Thigpen, Alabama corrections commissioner. "It just doesn't make sense to pump millions into corrections and have no effect on the crime rate (Ticer, May 8, 1989:80).

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“Every week, like clockwork, the total number of prison inmates in the United States grows by 1,000 people” (Barret and Greene, April 18, 1989:18). An estimated 3.2 million adult men and women, one in fifty-five U.S. residents eighteen years or older, were under some form of correctional supervision at the end of 1986. This 1986 figure for the total adult correctional population shows a seven percent increase from 1985, and a thirty percent increase since 1983 (U.S. Dept. of Justice, 1988). Of this total population, 627,402 were incarcerated in federal and state prison systems as of December 1988. Current incarceration figures reveal a six month increase of 23,240, or a yearly growth rate of 7.4 percent for 1988 (Skorneck, April 24, 1989).

Inducting one thousand new prisoners into the national prison population each week is the same as "two big prisons worth of lawbreakers, most of whom costs between \$14,000 to \$33,000 a year to feed, house, and guard, ... [when] the U.S. already has the highest incarceration rate in the Western world (Barret and Greene, April 18, 1989:18). The National Institute of Justice (NIJ) reported in 1987 that the national average cost for incarceration of each of these prisoners, per year, is \$25,800.

The cost of building a new maximum security cell is cited at \$85,000 for 1989, or \$42.5 million for a standard 500 man facility (De Agostina, March 27, 1989). "The total tab, just for prison construction will be in excess of \$70 billion over the next few decades (Barret and Greene, April 18, 1989:18). this "gargantuan prison construction boom now devours about \$65 million a week" nationally at all levels (Ticer, May 8, 1989:80). Even with this immense expenditure, capacity has "not kept pace with the inmate population; ... overall prison capacity increased by just 5.5 percent in 1988 (Skorneck, April 24, 1989). This insufficient growth of capacity results in a deficit of demand over supply of thirty-five percent, with this cycle repeating itself yearly throughout the 1980s. "The U.S. Sentencing Commission estimates there will be a [further] doubling of the prison population over the next decade (Williams, 1989). The money for this massive and already delinquent building program has to come from somewhere at the expense of someone else.

Connecticut is facing program cuts in schools while money is being used to fund the \$400 million, 4,600 bed prison expansion in the state. In California, tuition for in-state students is being raised by ten percent to fund the thirteen percent expanded prison budget (Barret and Greene, April 18, 1989:18). The state of Michigan has "20 prisons planned at a typical cost of \$36 million a piece ... One state senator complains that 'prisons are taking everything there is. It's the

biggest growth industry in the entire state.' " (*ibid.*) The double digit growth in correction budgets is adversely affecting everything from our children's education, to our own health care, to our parent's retirement foundation.

The *Bureau of Justice Statistics Data Report, 1987* provides the following information. In 1986 reported crime touched 22.2 households - twenty-five percent of all households. The total economic loss to victims of personal and household crime in 1985 was computed to be over thirteen billion dollars. Federal, state, and local spending for all civil and criminal justice activities in fiscal 1985 was \$45.6 billion. The total cost of crime to our society in 1985 was in excess of sixty billion dollars for the expense incurred from victimization and the expenditure made to combat this social affliction.

Obviously, it is important for society to utilize prison systems as one means to police and protect itself; it is also a very expensive proposition to incarcerate someone. Thus society should concern itself with what is purchased for that expenditure. The generally accepted purpose of incarceration is to protect society from the violent offender and to rehabilitate those so incarcerated. In reality, an additional function of incarceration for society is to extract some limited form of vengeance or retribution on those so incarcerated while they serve their sentences and are "theoretically" offered the opportunity to rehabilitate themselves (Editorial, *Time*, May 15, 1989:38). As an example of this established social-management philosophy, most states constitutionally mimic the correctional philosophy expressed in the Indiana State Constitution: "[The] penal code shall be founded on the principles of reformation, and not vindictive justice (Indiana Department of Correction, 1983:7).

The national prison system, in all of its many diverse forms, is not achieving the intended purpose of its combined, and very costly existence. The national prison population exceeds 100 percent of the available capacity, and is steadily losing ground as the overcrowded populations swell with new inductees faster than it can build the infrastructure to house and manage them. "A survey of 44 State commissioners of corrections and 106 wardens once again highlights prison crowding ... as the biggest problem of the correctional system" (U.S. Department of Justice, August 1988). The problem has manifested itself to the point that, in 1989, the National Prison Project reports that nine entire state prison systems, and twenty-nine additional institutions are under court order or consent decree to improve conditions and limit population (National Prison Project, April 17, 1989).

The really frightening aspect of the growing prison population is reflected in the Bureau of Justice Statistics report that cites the national rate of recidivism at sixty-nine percent within six years after release (U.S. Department of Justice, May 1987). The Justice Department recently reported (1989) that 62.5 percent of those released reoffend within three years of release (Gordon, April 13, 1989). In other words, after spending \$25,000 a year for 'X' number of years - seven out of ten incarcerated individuals will commit more crimes after their release and be rearrested. This repeated crime spree charges society a high fee; a 1987 NIJ publication disseminated that a typical multi-offender will commit 187 crimes per year, for a total crime cost to society of \$430,000 (U.S. Department of Justice, 1987). In addition, a repeat offender's second series of crimes is generally more violent in nature when compared to their initial series of offenses.

It has become readily apparent from the established situation that "reducing recidivism is a huge challenge - and the key to taming corrections budgets" (Ticer, May 8, 1989:80). However, one deduces from these sad circumstances encompassing our nation's correctional system that either rehabilitation does not work, or it is not being effectively implemented. To understand this problem one must first define and, then, determine how one measures "successful rehabilitation." Robert Stroud (the Birdman) is quoted, in the classic film *The Birdman of Alcatraz*, as saying that rehabilitation is "to invest again with dignity." Stroud offers a great summation of the concept; yet it provides no means to measure rehabilitation effectively. It has been suggested that the rather simple method of comparing recidivism rates of prisoners in various designated programs to those of the general prison population would provide easy cost comparison analyses.

Several criminologists, sociologists, and psychologists will cry foul with this simple method. Some professionals in the field believe that judging a program's success or failure by recidivism rates alone is not a fair and reliable method of assessing the effectiveness of correctional rehabilitation programs. Their "common opinion [is] that there are simply too many other variables impacting on recidivism that should be taken into account (e.g. the environmental, occupational, and economic conditions the inmate faces upon being paroled)" (Peak, 1983:82). Other professionals in the field, though, believe that using program recidivism rates is a fair and valid measure in determining the success or failure of such programs. The value of comparing recidivism rates is that they provide a readily definitive result that focuses squarely on the purpose of rehabilitation programming. The encompassing environmental factors facing

paroled prisoners needs to be computed into the overall evaluation, but should not bar the comparison altogether of program recidivism rates to those of the general prison populations.

Post Secondary Education (PSE) programs have demonstrated significant reductions in the rate of recidivism for program participants in the nation's prisons. Courses of study some 297 identified in 1983, range from simple Associate degrees via correspondence to full, on-site Master degree programs from accredited universities (*ibid.*:79). these programs have been one of the few consistent bright spots in rehabilitation during the past fifteen years. Economically, they are proving to be one of the most cost effective programs in the correctional system.

A study conducted at the New Mexico State Prison revealed a fifteen percent recidivism rate for those who had completed one college course or more at the prison's university extension program, versus a rate of sixty-eight percent for the general prison population. It was further extrapolated that if the study had focused on degree recipients exclusively, the rate of recidivism would have been in the single digits. Another study conducted at Folsom prison California, during 1983, reported a zero percent rate of recidivism for those who had completed a baccalaureate degree. By comparison, the rate of recidivism for the state's general prison population for the same period was 55 percent within three years of release (Chase and Dickover, 1983:95). The Ball State University (BSU) extension program at the Indiana Reformatory began in 1976. In 1982, an institutional memo noted that over 200 inmates had participated in the program, and "that of those who earned their degrees, none have yet returned as inmates to the reformatory." (Holden, July 9, 1982)

These varying PSE programs are for the most part financed by combinations of federal and state education grants. The most obliging funding source is the federal Pell Grant, which covers approximately fifty percent of the collegiate costs. Leaving the other half to be covered by a collection of state grants, system program budgets, foundation funding, veterans' benefits, and the prisoners themselves. On average, the cost of a baccalaureate degree for a prisoner, from a state accredited university or college, is in the \$10,000 range. By comparison, the same degree earned "on-campus" incurs a total educational expense of \$25,000. This sum includes tuition, room and board charges, living and travelling expenses, and incidental campus fees (Ball State University, 1986:35-42).

The total education expense of \$10,000 for an institutionally earned four-year degree is only forty percent of the cost incurred to

incarcerate an individual for one year. The annual expense of "housing" a prisoner of \$25,000 is incurred whether the inmate vegetates, or educates her/himself. Secondly, the education is being purchased at a reduced rate since the student-inmate is already "housed" in an institution; room and board charges, travelling expenses, and incidental fees (sixty percent of the total collegiate expense) are thus not billed to the PSE program. For ten percent (\$2,500) of the cost for one year of incarceration (\$25,000), one year of PSE programming can be purchased. If such programming is continued for four years, according to the statistics, society will more than likely receive a prisoner, whose recidivism rate will be in the low double, if not single digit range.

Successful graduates of Post Secondary Education programs administered by the "Corrections Program" of the College of Santa Fe have gone on to many rewarding and varied careers. One such graduate went on to become a physician and another a vice-resident of an international company. A female "ex-con" is now a personnel director who has since earned a masters degree. At least four PSE program graduates have gone on to become teachers, passing on the precious gift of knowledge to a new generation. Probably the most interesting success story of such programming is that of a former death row inmate who rose to the directorship of a State Corrections Industry Department (Burkhead, 1988).

If our society educates/rehabilitates a prisoner at 40 percent of the standard cost of a collegiate education (baccalaureate level) and, upon release, that individual remains free, gains useful employment supporting her/himself and the economy, pays taxes contributing to the community tax coffers rather than being a drain upon those public funds, and becomes what Dr. James K. Danglade, Dean of BSU calls a "better citizen," has not the nation's correction system then fulfilled its intended mandate? (Bess, January 29, 1987)

Post Secondary Education programs are not being advocated as a "panacea" to the overall prison population/recidivism problem. Not all inmates will qualify for, or be interested in, such opportunities; however, such programming, based on rates of recidivism, has historically demonstrated that it can effectively and efficiently rehabilitate participants. *The Journal of Correctional Education* contained a poignant observation in the article reporting on the Folsom study. "Finally, it seems evident that the public, whose tax dollars on both the state and federal level support this program, have realized a high return on investment" (Chase and Dickover, 1983:95).

Perhaps, in all of this a quote of Dostoevsky's should be recalled. "The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its

prisons." So too, can one judge, in part, the economic health and social well being of a nation by the type of individual the society releases from its prisons.

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