

Society's Rejection of The Incarcerated

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Those of us who have been incarcerated before know what it means to be rejected; however, never before has the intensity of this rejection reached the levels we are currently experiencing. This rejection takes many forms — stiffer sentencing laws, stricter parole requirements, less emphasis on rehabilitation, the list goes on and on. Though we all experience and interpret it in different ways, its effect is to increase recidivism which eventually leads to overcrowding.

Everyone seems to ignore the problems that we encounter behind these walls. It does not matter that someone is sexually assaulted, nor does it matter that all our living conditions are poor. It is as if society refuses to acknowledge our existence or at best to minimize it. There seems to be an unspoken rule which denies us our claim to exist as legitimate members of society, albeit restricted at this present time.

An example of this is clearly displayed in the educational system. A prisoner applies for financial aid in order that s/he may be able to enroll in correspondence courses. The typical answer will be that when one is incarcerated qualification for aid is justified because the prisoner has no income; however, you are disqualified because when one is incarcerated you do not have living expenses.¹ Meanwhile, it is proclaimed through the media that every member of society is guaranteed the right to pursue an education.

To emphasize this point more clearly, consider the following. If you read the daily tabloid or watch the evening news, you are constantly exposed to stories about how this or that community does not want prisoners living or working in their immediate area, even though they may be 'the best inmates' confined in the state. Why does this attitude prevail? The most logical answer would be because of fear. What these people fear has yet to be defined. Of course, they fear that their security is threatened or that their businesses will be adversely affected as a result of the negative impact our presence will, debatably, have. When these fears become distorted, are they still valid? Should they be allowed to influence decisions about where we

work and live? I say no for reasons that should be apparent, but I shall nevertheless explain.

First of all is the fact — which society so readily seems to forget — that we are the same sons and daughters, mothers and fathers, friends and neighbours who lived within these same communities as free people before we wound up in prison through a series of faulty decisions. While we were free people society didn't consider us to be dangerous or a detriment to local commerce. Where during the transition from being free to being incarcerated did this transformation into being barbaric take place? Does this analogy seem too extreme? If it does, then that is good because our situation is extreme.

Does the single fact of being incarcerated warrant this fear *aka* rejection? I had not thought so, but apparently my thinking does not reflect that of society, or rather the society of the media — which brings me to my second point. One should bring to light the culprit guilty of spreading this contamination.

Since its beginnings the newspaper has had the power to enhance or destroy the image of a person, group, or organisation by presenting and promoting either an objective or biased version of a set of facts. This power of persuasion was further heightened with the advent of television, which furnished the media with access to a wider audience; thus, supplying it with yet more power to influence society. For example, in the United States the press and television exploited the facts surrounding the crime committed by Willie Horton while on furlough. The long term effects of this incident have yet to be realized.²

The image of the incarcerated person has been so twisted and distorted by the media that when the word 'convict' or 'inmate' is mentioned people automatically exhibit fear, never once stopping to think about what it is they really fear. People have reached the stage where they rely solely on the media's portrayal of the incarcerated individual. When we judge a class of people by the behaviour of one, or when we accept without question the opinions of others, we are engaging in stereotyping. This has proven to be faulty thinking at its worst, as the stereotyping of all blacks as lazy, shiftless and illiterate illustrates.

The media has conditioned people to believe that once a person becomes incarcerated, s/he undergoes a change which makes her/him become some type of degenerate and this just is not so. We are classified from one end of the security spectrum to the other, all the while being relegated to the station of sub-human. Whereas, if the truth be known, we are simply people who have exercised bad judgment (as all humans are prone to do) concerning what we have done in life, and now we are being held responsible for these decisions in the manner that society deems appropriate. As an added thought, it is ironic that society erected these institutions for those of us who break its norms, yet it fears what these institutions do to the people they confine.

Another aspect of this rejection is the effect it has on how we interact with each other. To define a group of people into a category is to place limits around them. We are hindered in almost every avenue we pursue because there is always the spectre of the media staring us in the face, saying this is what you are supposed to represent, this is what you will represent; stay within these boundaries. When we seek to venture outside these arbitrary boundaries, the fact that we are unwanted is rudely brought home to us by the media's portrayal of society's reactions. This has the effect of inhibiting all ideas and actions aimed to break down these arbitrary barriers. The end result is apathy: we lose all interest in conforming to society's norms because society is saying to us that no matter what we do we will always be perceived as something less than human.

Surely a basic need of all humans is acceptance. An individual will only allow her/himself to be rejected for so long before s/he ceases all efforts to gain acceptance. This serves to build-up resentment and hostility towards society in general. Since society is an abstract concept rather than an actual entity which one can confront, these resentments have no conduits for release. Consequently, we have violence directed toward prisoners and often times toward those in the free world.

Perhaps most ironic of all is the fact that the thrust of this rejection — which encompasses prejudice and discrimination — is aimed at us only when we are incarcerated. Once we are

released, these acts of stupidity against us decrease at an astounding rate. It is as if society is saying in effect that we only reject and fear you while you are incarcerated; the moment after your release you are of no concern. What fundamental change takes place upon release? We have again become anonymous!

CONCLUSION

The law states that we are to pay our debt to society through incarceration, that we are entitled to make mistakes, and once the debt has been relieved we can resume a normal life-style. If all this is to be realized, then people must recognize that their fear and subsequent reactions, which are guided and reinforced by the media, are based on faulty information. They must also realize that generalizations cannot be made about people without those who are the objects of these generalizations suffering adverse effects. And finally, in order to give substance to the principles espoused here, people must destroy the stereotyped images they have of the incarcerated person. Granted such changes will not come over night, but unless we all come together for the purpose of revising this image, a valuable segment of society is forever...Doomed!

ENDNOTES

1. The response is typical for prisoners incarcerated by the Arkansas Department of Correction. Other jurisdictions may have other arrangements (See Taylor, 1989: 61).
2. Willie Horton was serving a natural life sentence in Massachusetts for murder. In exchange for information, he received furloughs to the community for a considerable period of time before he left the state and committed notorious crimes in the southern United States. The case was exploited in the 1988 presidential election by George Bush to accuse the Governor of Massachusetts, the Democratic Party's presidential candidate, of being soft on crime. The governor's response was to cancel the furlough system and categorically return prisoners serving life sentences in minimum security prisons to medium and maximum institutions. The canceled furloughs and forced transfers continue to cause considerable hardships for the vast majority of prisoners with life sentences who used furloughs and minimum security classifications without incidents [Ed. note.].

REFERENCES

- Taylor, J.M. (1989) "The Economics of Educational Rehabilitation." *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*, 2 (1):57-64.