America the (Not-So) Great:

Why The Lack of Prison Rehabilitation is Punishing You, Too

By: Kelly Ganci

How Did We Get Here? A Brief Overview of US Prison Strategy

The United States has always portrayed itself as a beacon of hope and justice for all. A right to a fair trial, right to have an attorney, right to due process—all in the name of legal equality. Once you get convicted however, it seems that your right to fair treatment is dead in the water. In recent history, the US has prided itself on having a “tough on crime” stance. You’ve heard the past 6 Presidents say it, and you’ve heard our newest President say it: America has a zero tolerance policy for criminals. If they do the community wrong, the government will make sure they suffer severe consequences. After all, according to the US’ strategy when it comes to prison, the only way to turn a bad apple into a good apple is to let it sit and think about what it has done. But what our stance on justice has not yet grasped is that these apples have fallen far from the tree—which is precisely why they are behind bars. After all, leaving a bad apple alone will only cause it to become rotten.

Prison Just Isn’t Doing Its Job—A Failed System

Recidivism is the term typically used to describe the rate at which prisoners return to prison after being released. The Bureau of Justice as well as other sources estimate somewhere between 57-65% of prisoners commit new crimes after being released and in certain states that number can be as high as 73%. Essentially, 6-7 prisoners out of every 10 return after they get out of jail. This suggests that the current prison system is failing to do one of its primary jobs, which is to deter crime and allow criminals to learn from their mistakes so that one visit to prison is enough. If it were an employee, we would have fired it by now. What is the point of giving a person prison time if they all come back anyway?

We have been conditioned as a society to think of criminals as demented, vile, and unsalvageable and sometimes, admittedly, they are. But the criminals that fall into this category are in the significant minority. It is proven that with the help of prison rehabilitation programs, prison can be a successful entity and have an exodus of prisoners instead of an influx of them.

Prison Rehab Programs: The Get Out Of Jail (Kind Of) Free Card

Programs for prisoners can be surprisingly controversial given our country’s opinion on criminals and the way justice should be administered. However, when implemented, they bring the alarmingly high percent of prisoners who return to the big house down to a staggeringly impressive low. Only about 19% of prisoners who engage in these programs manage to return to prison, often times in a technical violation of their parole. They range from comprehensive to voluntary and sporadic, but when they have been implemented on a trial basis, their effects are undoubtable.

Need some examples of successful programs?

1. Prison Education Programs—recidivism for inmates who get their high school diploma/GED is about 30% and even lower for college grads as was the case in 11 California correctional facilities

2. Job Training—learning a trade incentivizes prisoners to disengage in crime and participate in the economy, leading to a reduction in recidivism by 43% in a RAND Safety and Justice National Study

3. Counseling and Psychology—from therapy, psych evaluation, drug counseling, to bringing dogs to jail mental health counseling is one of the biggest reducers in the prison population, almost 80% in a Kansas State study

4. Contemplative programs—engaging in yoga, religion, and meditation can be a crucial form of healthy stress relief and this active mindfulness drastically reduces prison crimes, says Lionheart. They have been introducing their “emotional literacy” programs in a handful of prisons in all 50 states and the DC region

5. Re-entry Training—teaching criminals how not to be criminals once they enter the real world is important. Setting them up with housing, helping them get a job, and teaching them how to act socially are important steps in making sure they don’t get into more trouble on the outside. In California’s San Quentin prison, out of the 200 inmate test group, only 6 inmates returned after this program was implemented.

Why Should You Care?

“The degree of civilization in a society is revealed by entering its prisons.”

–Fyodor Dostoevsky

For those who are familiar with the prison world, none of this is or will be news to you. But for a lot of people, prison is a faraway domain beyond our spectrum of concern. Sure, these programs might be helpful you might be thinking, but why does this matter for me? This thinking is precisely the problem in criminal justice—too many people assume that they have no vested interest in what happens to criminals. However, this is a delusion. There are countless reasons why the average person should care about prison rehabilitation, and the following comprises only the beginning.

Taxpayers Behind Bars—an Economic Ball and Chain

Prisons cost the United States around $80 billion dollars every single year. That’s more than double what we spend on funding science research and more than we spend on education. It’s almost *triple* what we spend on international communication and aid. That money comes from hard earned taxpayer money. These allocated funds would be worth it if prison did the job it was meant to do, but as we see, it does not. If 6-7 prisoners out of every 10 come back to prison anyway, then what is the money going towards? You might as well throw it out the window.

It is true that most rehabilitation programs will take around 300,000 dollars per program per prison to implement— an added cost which most taxpayers are against. But what they don’t understand? When implemented, these programs result in dramatically less prisoners. At a yearly cost of $31,000 dollars per prisoner per year, this yields a net savings of several million dollars a year. Furthermore, since the US tends to keep prisoners in prison for an extended amount of time with each additional crime (think 3 Strikes), it only gets more expensive as the prisoners get older if they keep returning to prison time and time again. Geriatric prisoners account for the most spending done by prisons. Think about the price for a nursing home for your elderly parents and times that by about 26,500. That’s how much taxpayers are giving to fund geriatric prisoners. If we implement prison rehabilitation programs, about half of these prisoners won’t have to come back and we won’t have to fund them. The cost for these rehab programs will be upfront and one time only—taxpayers will only reap the benefits over time. This not only might lower taxes for the consumer, but also will free up funds to improve infrastructure, build parks, or buy school supplies.

Which sounds a lot better than using them to pay for prison food.

Prison Robs its Prisoners—and the Community—of Benefits

Most prisoners, upon release end up being leeches—sucking up the resources and handouts it provides. As a society, we resent them for this and use it as another example of why and how they are meaningless to the greater community. However, what most people are unaware of is that they are marginalized and disenfranchised from the moment they step out of their jumpsuits. In America, punishment does not stop once they leave prison. Our society insists on refusing to allow ex-convicts back into the community and be productive members of society due to the lack of these programs and re-entry mechanisms. If they leave prison mentally ill, without job training, and without a high school diploma, the data shows us that they will return. It is difficult enough to obtain a job, a house, a bank loan, food stamps and voting registration with those obstacles, but add convicted felon to that list? It is the kiss of death. They have no choice but to rely on government assistance and other handouts. That, or return to crime which most eventually do. If we provided them with better rehabilitation programs, they will become participatory members in society which benefits everyone. With a job, they can participate and boost the local economy and with a house, they won’t take up room in homeless shelters. With their voting rights, they will take meaningful action in local and federal elections. Arguably most importantly, they won’t need welfare, which saves taxpayers even more money than the millions mentioned above. Helping the community and the prisoners flourish—a win-win for prisoner and citizen alike.

Where Do We Go From Here?

The options have been laid out, the math has been done, the data has been analyzed and they all point to one thing: prison rehabilitation programs not only work, but they save money and contribute to bettering communities. Who wouldn’t want extra dollars in their pockets and happier cities? Change starts with altering our attitudes and the way we as citizens view justice. Get the conversation going.

Call your local congressman.

Write a letter to your Senator.

Better yet, contact your state’s Judicial or Justice Assemblyman.

Ask local, currently running prison rehabilitation programs for ways to help.

And if you don’t, you’re not only cheating yourself, but everyone around you, too.