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Innovation in prisons: What America can learn from foreign humanitarian prisons

Robert Frost once said: “Forgive me my nonsense, as I also forgive the nonsense of those that think they talk sense.” It’s hard for anyone to forgive a mistake or action awful in its essence but where does such festering hate get anyone in this world. The archaic concepts that exists in American prison system are the foundation of such hate. The feel and desire to give someone what society deems as justified punishment. In actuality how productive is this? Why is such a drastic and awfully change in living condition helpful to these people who have done awful things. I think that generally speaking in America it doesn't matter if they're helpful methods. The common theme is these criminals deserve awful conditions, awful punishment and there's no hope for them to get better and become productive members of society. The point of this essay is to ask why can't there be hope. If we as a society are so quick to judge these people without considering their value as American citizens then we are fools. The truth is any man or woman can change and this prison system based on a punishment ideology is not helping them get any better. “Big time, 110 rehabilitation, lock 'em lip like animals then let them out on society crazed and angry. Shit don't make no sense but the people cry for punishment and the politicians abide them-can they really be so blind?” (Robby Wideman, in Brothers and keepers)

According to journalist and professor of English at John Jay College Of Criminal Justice, Baz Dreisinger, some countries like Norway and Italy have implemented more benevolent prisons. By this I mean that they are facilities that of course in the idea of a prison, isolates a criminal away from normal society but instead of taking away their basic human rights and punishing them with extreme conditions and harsh limitations they treat them like a human who's screwed up and can get better again. To be more detailed, many of these prisons operate like quality hotels where you cannot leave often. They have various recreational activities and many job type services so you could contribute to the country and become part of the workforce even in the prison itself. The conditions are also pleasant and the guards seem to maintain a clear understanding relationship with the prisoners and everyone acknowledges that it's a safe trusting environment. Dreisinger also claims this promotes responsibility and good social behaviors in situations after the release of the prisoner. Should the American government alter its prison systems to function more geared toward rehabilitation and not punishment? In this essay I'm going to persuade you on how the American prison system can improve using concepts from proven rehabilitation in other countries. This lesson can be learned by realizing the value in rehabilitated prisoners, decreasing the expenses by having less packed correctional facilities, a discussion on humane treatment and a discussion on why severe punishment is not necessary for criminals.

The biggest thing the American people, politicians or otherwise do not realize is the value in our criminals. It sounds like an odd or obtuse way to think yes but these convicts which some of us have no relation or attachment to have tremendous value to The United States as a whole.

It makes sense that when we think of convict we think of an awful person who has no moral compass and no ability to perform in society. But why do we think this way? Every human on earth has made a mistake here and there and any reasonable productive person can get over the mistake and become productive again. Why can't the same be said for criminals? Part of the problem is how we view these people.

A prisoner at Bastoy Island, a prison in Norway once said that “Treat people like dirt, and they will be dirt. Treat them like human beings, and they will act like human beings.” This simple logic from the prisoner is validated through fact. In comparison to America’s recidivism rate of 67% Norway a country with lenient and humanitarian “open prisons” has a much lower rate of 20%(Where Should We Invade Next).

Another example of the success of prisoners going back into society with healthy environments and strong financial stability is Gorgona prison. This prison while not being an open prison like the few in Norway carries the renowned aspect of being a rather small prison on an island which employs its convicts in numerous vineyards and teaches them the valuable skill of winemaking. Ironically similar to the previous comparison Gorgona prison also has a 20% recidivism rate while the rest of the country has an 80% rate. This is even more evidence to prove how valuable these prison methods are. They make the value of a convicts life just as strong as a normal citizen. It's simple really. Tell a man to sit in his crime surrounded by reminders of his punishments and reminders of his guilt will only keep him a criminal. Teach a

man to be productive and they'll continue their productivity because it's not a punishment, it's a normal way to live.

In relation to added workforce countries like America would have if we had a higher recidivism rate due to more humane rational prisons there is one arguably more important attribution. I think everyone can agree when we look into the basic data on the topic prisons of any type or capacity are way too expensive. Especially in a country like America where "2,319,258 Americans were incarcerated in U.S. jails and prisons, making the ratio of imprisoned adults about one in 100. The cost of retaining this number of individuals in prison has also grown with the prison population. The Pew report states that in 2007, state corrections spending reached \$49 billion, an increase of \$11 billion over 1987 corrections spending. However, according to the Pew Center, the impact of this high incarceration rate and increase in spending has not obviously reduced crime. Adam Gelb, director of the Public Safety Performance Project, states, "For all the money spent on corrections today, there hasn't been a clear and convincing return for public safety." This just in 2009 according to The Greenville Press and according to them these numbers are only on the rise. In a country like America where 5% of our tax dollars as a whole go to prisons and forms of corrections(Center on Budget and Policy Priorities)

I think it's quite important to think about how much we're spending as a country. In actually we're wasting. A waste of expense for criminals that could be leaving prison and due to more humanitarian prisons living a productive life out in society just like so many others are

doing in other countries like Norway, Scandinavian countries, Italy and the Netherlands, where there is actually and unusual problem, a lack of prisoners to place in their cells. “About a third of Dutch prison cells sit empty, according to the Ministry of Justice. Criminologists attribute the situation to a spectacular fall in crime over the past two decades and an approach to law enforcement that prefers rehabilitation to incarceration. "The Dutch have a deeply ingrained pragmatism when it comes to regulating law and order," said René van Swaaningen, professor of criminology at Erasmus School of Law in Rotterdam, noting the country's relatively liberal approach to "soft" drugs and prostitution. "Prisons are very expensive. Unlike the United States, where people tend to focus on the moral arguments for imprisonment, the Netherlands is more focused on what works and what is effective." Recorded crime has shrunk by about a quarter over the past nine years, according to the country's national statistics office, and that is expected to translate into a surplus of 3,000 prison cells by 2021. The government has shuttered 19 of nearly 60 prisons over the past three years, and a government report leaked last year suggested that more cuts were coming.”(New York Times) This is only more evidence to support the facts of how expensive these prisons can get and how much more productive it is to have productive ex cons, leaving the prisons and leading a new life not costing america’s citizens a cent, especially since they are always one of us.

Now what you might be realizing what one of us means. This should not be made into a political view. We all have intangible rights, and for good reasons. I’m not sure why people find criminals to be less than human in any way. They’re just the same, people who’ve made mistakes. Mistakes can be moved on from and a mistake is not something worthy of intense

punishment and reducing a person to become a degenerate of some sort. They are one of us. Human beings with lives, with value. For this segment of the paper i will often refer to a expertly researched article from The Age, which details the studies based around qualities of living in prison and how that connects to prisoners attitudes and the recidivism of countries in relation to such living qualities. They claim that “The evidence suggesting smart prison design lowers reoffending rates is growing. A 2014 study by Dutch researchers who surveyed prisoners in traditional prisons and those who live in apartment/share house type settings found that those housed in the latter facilities were far more positively engaged and had much better relations with prison staff.

In nations such as Norway, Germany and Austria prisons are notable for their commitment to campus style living and large open spaces with an emphasis on natural light. Prisoners live in apartments with each other, there are rarely bars on windows, and the only real difference between life in prison and life on the outside is that in the former case they cannot leave the prison campus. In Denmark prisoners' kitchen spaces are designed so they can prepare healthy meals for themselves rather than having to eat in communal areas that look and feel like a 19th-century boarding school mess.” Not this is only in a dutch study but this offers an outside viewpoint from an Australian journalist studying the various prison systems and offering his calculated insight. He later goes on to talk about how a man at Harvard university has designed a cross between a prison and a college and how this is again both healthier living conditions and a innovative yet currently only experimental way to get ex cons into society and be productive.

My final argument in this essay is an emotional one. The prior topics may have defeated any opposition by showing how productive criminals can be in society if given more human facilities. I also covered why it's so silly to create such an expense for the American people by having criminals repeat the cycle that is encouraging them to go back to prison with punishment and not rehabilitation. The only argument remaining is one with little rationality. This goes toward the people saying "we can't be humane, they deserve the punishment they receive". Now I will acknowledge if someone caused my family or me harm in any way I would immediately seek the sometimes justified punishment they "deserve" but I also can realize how emotionally driven and wrong this is. It might be a harsh comparison but with this logic every time someone made a mistake they should never be forgiven for that mistake and they should sulk in the pain of their guilt. This is the basis of the hate filled mentality. A viewpoint that is understandable but too emotional to recognize logic. Not a blind hate but definitely an overpowering misguided one.

To those who ask "what kind of punishment are they given then?" I say isolation is their punishment and rehabilitation is their resolve. A new article written by Victor Lund Shammas details a series of interviews he had with inmates from Scandinavian prisons. In this article he goes on to say how these open prisons offer more mental and reformatory punishments along the lines of "(1) confusion; (2) anxiety and boundlessness; (3) ambiguity; (4) relative deprivation; and (5) individual responsibility". Using these methods a criminal can feel isolated from society to the point of an everlasting hunger to rejoin and even prove themselves. These mental punishments also lean to give responsibility to the criminals and make them valued members of

society something which they are made to do as punishment but can carry these learned job related skills throughout their life as a whole. In this way the punishment is education, forced but practical, painless but helpful, and punishment nonetheless.

This essay isn't an argument of morals, it's an argument for our country. It's a reasonable argument. When we live in a country where the recidivism rate is at 67% percent and our spending on prisons and correctional systems has reached the billions per year I think it's time to reconsider our systems and innovate with the proven successes of other countries. As a fellow American I can see the plentiful amounts of evidence that prove more humanitarian prisons are beneficial to society the country as a whole. For not only the sake of our criminals, but the sake of us and as a people and the country operating as a whole, I hope you can see the benefits presented in this essay as well.