

RELAX, HAVE FUN, THIS IS PRISON

by
Leslie Medlik

Business Administration Major
Luther High School South, Chicago, IL

Prison: it is a place for criminals. It is a place where society keeps the social deviants. Prisoners are individuals who have chosen to go against the rules that society has set up. Criminals make their own rules, they choose to kill other people, steal from other people, assault other people, rape other people. They victimize innocent people. We, as a society, have deemed criminals undeserving individuals. Yet when we send them to prison, they are treated like first class citizens. Why does our country give special luxuries to these criminals? Prisoners have televisions in their rooms that have premium cable channels. They are also allowed to view R-rated and X-rated movies (Lacayo 31). They are given an enormous amount of leisure time. Within this time they have the option to participate in weight lifting, boxing, basketball, wrestling, martial arts and to talk on the telephone (Stratton 87). Prisoners are also given comfortable living conditions in which they have roomy cells and air conditioning. Prisoners are also given an education, if they choose to pursue it. This current lenient treatment of prisoners is both wrong and costly. Criminals do not deserve the luxurious treatment they receive. It is also wrong for the taxpayers to be forced to support it. The United States jails more of its citizens than any other country (Lashmar 20). In 1993, we jailed 520 people per 100,000, which adds up to 1.1 million Americans. The cost in 1994 for taking care of these prisoners was 20 billion dollars (Lacayo 31). California alone has spent \$5 billion over the past decade just building new prisons ("Crazy about Crime" A28). Who is paying for the luxuries of all these prisoners? The taxpayers pay a large sum. That is not justice. It is not fair that good, law-abiding citizens, who cannot afford most of what the prisoners have, should be dishing out their hard-earned money to ensure criminals a comfortable style of living.

First, we should decide if prisoners are entitled to the rights and luxuries that they receive. Prisoners should not be treated like the average citizen when they do not function in society as one. With current prison conditions, prisoners do not put into the economy but only take from it. They live off of other people's money. Prisoners should not be tortured or treated cruelly. However, their life in prison should be hard and unpleasant. People say that prisoners have rights under the Constitution. But don't you think that they actually gave up some of those rights when they decided to commit a crime? Don't you think that when murderers take the lives of innocent victims that they should have something taken away from them as well? If the system will not take their lives, then at least it should take some of their rights and privileges. Does a murderer truly have the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness? No. When you take away someone's rights you also offer up your own. Yes, by imprisoning criminals we have definitely taken away their right to liberty, but we have not taken their right to life and with all of the perks in prisons today, have we really taken away their pursuit of happiness?

For some prisoners their life inside the prison is better than the one they were living on the outside. The number and content of lawsuits that are filed by prisoners is absurd. In 1994, 70 percent of Arizona's lawsuits against the state were brought up by prisoners (Bidinotto 70). In 1993, 14 percent of all federal civil lawsuits were filed by inmates. Most of these charges are irrational and should not be brought up under any circumstances, yet prisoners are coming out victorious. A California case is a prime example. "One inmate, who tortured and killed his own infant daughter, wrote sadistic stories in exchange for pornographic photos of women being tortured. When the prison staff confiscated and destroyed the photos, he sued in Federal Court. California taxpayers ended up paying the prisoner compensation" (Bidinotto 69-70). Does this man deserve to view pornography when obviously it is bad for his mental state? Are prisons not trying to help individuals with their unhealthy state? Larry Meachum, Connecticut's Commissioner of Correction, states, "We must attempt to modify criminal behavior and hopefully not return a more damaged human being to society than we received" (qtd. in Bidinotto 66). In that California man's case, would not his viewing of sadistic pornography be more harmful to him than helpful? Yes, prisoners should be allowed some rights but not all those that are held by law-abiding citizens, much less those that go beyond reason.

Prisoners also have the option of pursuing an education. I have nothing against a good education. I just find it somewhat unnerving to think that if a person commits a crime, we give him a free education. Yet, the government gives little, if any, financial aid to students who have worked hard in schools and have stayed within the restrictions of the law. I think prisoners should be given the chance to obtain a high school diploma or GED but I really do not think it should extend much further than that. I think it is a complete waste of taxpayers money when prisoners with life sentences earn two or three master's degrees (Stratton 89). If prisoners want an extended education then I think that they should have to pay for it. If they do not have a long prison sentence then I think they should even be required to attend school after they leave prison. They should have the same burden of getting into a college and financing it as everyone else does. Why should we allow parents and students to struggle and clear out their savings accounts to fund a college education when we offer it to prisoners who have offended society? Our government has to start setting standards. Statistics show that 60 to 70 percent of inmates revert to crime after release (Bidinotto 69). Many criminals that were once in prison will be second-time offenders and return. Is that not a complete waste of an education when we can give it to someone who strives to hold a career in society and to be an integral part of society? California alone spent 50 million dollars on educating prisoners during 1993-94 (Bidinotto 68). The government gives prisoners educational grants (Stratton 87). Yet, Congress proposed to cut financial aid to students by 10.4 billion dollars for the 1996-97 school year. How can we allow the government to give criminals better educational benefits than those given to hard-working students?

Rehabilitation and counseling is a large part of the prison system. Yes, that is a main component of the American prison system and it does strive to help criminals re-enter society as better citizens. Mercer Regional Correctional Facility, in western Pennsylvania, employs five psychologists and ten counselors for their 850 felons whom they refer to as "clients"

(Bidinotto 65-66). This includes extensive counseling and treatment for mental health, aggressive behavior, domestic violence, sex offenses, substance abuse and any other problem that could be plaguing the prisoner. This is expensive treatment that the average laboring citizen cannot always afford. It consumes at least 40 percent of prison expenses (Bidinotto 70). This is a large sum of money that taxpayers unwillingly give out for criminals who may be too far gone to be helped by a little psychotherapy. Mercer Regional Correctional Facility has more counselors per prisoner than the average Chicago high school has per student. In my Chicago high school we had one certified counselor for our 375 students. Adolescence is a time of many changes and problems. Children need guidance, help and often just someone to talk to. Yet, with the ratio of students to counselors, a student would have to make an appointment with a counselor and possibly be forced to wait. This is not fair. Taxpayers pay for the upkeep of public schools but their children may not be getting the right care and attention. Maybe if the government would invest more money into counseling for the school system some future problems might be prevented. Maybe they could give a child the help he or she needs before he or she commits a crime against society and is put into prison. Taxpayers will have to spend even more money on the individual when they become a criminal. Unfortunately it may be too late by that time. Therapy is often misused by inmates. Instead of using it as a means of healing, prisoners use it to "chip time off their terms" (Bidinotto 69). Unfortunately, money for therapy may be wasted because no one can prove that it actually works. According to criminologist, Charles Logan, "Despite claims to the contrary, no type of treatment has been effective in rehabilitating criminals or preventing future criminal behavior" (qtd. Bidinotto 69). When a New York State prison counselor was questioned on how many sex offenders he has rehabilitated in his years on the job, his answer was an unnerving "none" (69). So, if all of these programs have not been proven as effective ways to deal with criminals and the crime problem, then why does the government continue to spend such enormous amounts of taxpayers' money on it? Government officials need to take a closer look at the outcome of their programs. They also need to be more conservative with taxpayers money.

Another unnecessary cost for prisons is the luxuries that are granted to the criminals. Prisons all across the country contain many perks for the prisoners. Mississippi, Ohio, Wisconsin and North Carolina are among many states that allow prisoners to have air-conditioning and television in their rooms. Along with that, prisoners have access to weight-lifting equipment, basketball, boxing, wrestling, martial arts and telephones (Stratton 87). At Mercer Regional Correctional Facility they have a "Recreation Building" where everyone can participate in the "Leisure Fitness Program." Their facilities include a full-sized basketball court, handball area, punching bag, volleyball net, barbells and weight-lifting machines. They also have nine electronic exercise bikes and four stair-type aerobics machines which all face a television. All these weight-lifting privileges have caused more mayhem in the prisons than healing. At the Arizona Department of Corrections, during 1993, \$600, 000 to \$700, 000 in medical bills were racked up by prisoners with weight-lifting injuries (Bidinotto 67). During the 1993 riot in Lucasville, Ohio, prisoners used barbells to smash a cinder-block wall (Stratton 89). In both Fallsburg, New York and North Carolina, prisoners enjoy drums, guitars

and other musical equipment (Lacayo 31, Bidinotto 67). I do not think prisoners deserve such extravagant equipment when my high school is cursed with rusty, old instruments and an amplifier that worked only on occasion. "At the Jefferson City Correctional Center in Missouri, inmates run their own around-the-clock, closed-circuit TV studio. Four channels routinely broadcast movies containing sex, horror and violence" (Bidinotto 67). Once again, I pose the question: how is that beneficial to prisoners? Does viewing sex, horror, and violence prepare them to be better members of society? Of course not. So why do we allow them to participate in it? It is absurd and pointless. At the Massachusetts Correctional Institution in Norfolk, they hold an annual "Lifers Banquet." Catered prime-rib is served to 33 convicts, mostly murderers, and 49 invited guests (Bidinotto 67). Murderers are being served prime-rib when most law-abiding citizens cannot even afford it. I have had prime-rib only once. Sure, if a person is going to spend his or her life in prison, they deserve a special dinner maybe once, but not annually. With all of the "leisure-fun" time that prisoners pursue, when do they have the chance to sit and ponder the crime that they have committed? When do they have the chance to do anything to benefit society? Inmates should be given projects to pay back the community. Conjugal visits also call for a large sum of money. In New York's maximum-security Attica prison, they have three buildings that are referred to as "the hotel." A counselor schedules up to 18 inmates per week for sex with their wives. These visits are offered at 14 other New York prisons, and seven other states including Washington and New Mexico. These other places are equipped with cottages, trailers, mobile homes and tents (Bidinotto 66). Sex is a need for some people and it is definitely a natural desire for all people. However, it is not a basic necessity for survival. No person and no prisoner has or will ever become completely dysfunctional due to lack of sexual contact. Prisoners will survive without sex. It is just another luxury that they take advantage of at the taxpayers expense. I think all of that energy could be better spent on other projects that could do good for both the prisoner and society.

My thoughts on how to handle prisoners coincide greatly with those of Sheriff Joe Arpaio of Phoenix, Arizona. He has set up "tent cities" that force prisoners to endure the heat of outdoors. They also work during the day. For free time, they get to view CNN, old Disney films and reruns of Newt Gingrich's ten part course on revitalizing American civilization (Lacayo 31). He has also cut costs by \$100,000 simply by taking away the coffee pots (*Hard Copy*.) Arpaio states, "I want to make this place so unpleasant that they won't even think about doing something that could bring them back" (qtd. 31). This is exactly how prison should be--an unpleasant place, not a resort. People say that prisoners serve "hard time," and I think it is time that the government started giving truth to that phrase. Give the prisoners a hard time so they have something to dread the next time they think about committing a crime. Do not give them relaxation and a luxurious lifestyle to anticipate.

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WE HAVE GOT A PRAYER

by

Victoria Morton

Nursing Major

Wheeler High School, Valparaiso, IN

On June 16, 1962, the United States Supreme Court, by a verdict of six to one, took prayer out of the public schools. The Supreme Court granted this decision in response to a petition filed by parents of ten pupils from a school district of New Hyde Park in the state of New York. The parents objected to the practice of reciting "the Regents' Prayer" (composed by the New York State's Board of Regents) aloud in the presence of a school teacher at the beginning of each school day. The parents claimed that this practice was contrary to their religious beliefs. The Supreme Court ruled the prayer unconstitutional, "not only because it is an act of worship, but also because the prayer establishes the religious beliefs embodied within it" (Kik 7). The Supreme Court further stated that their decision reflected the writers of our Constitution's belief that, "religion is too personal, too sacred, too holy, to permit its unhallowed perversion by a civil magistrate"(7). This separation between Church and State reached deep into each and every citizen's life. The reinstatement of prayer in public schools has been pursued many times in the past thirty years, and it is time to lay the subject at rest. I consider myself to be a "prayer warrior," taking every opportunity to turn to the Lord for strength, advice, comfort, praise, or whatever the situation may warrant. When I initially considered prayer in the public schools I supported it, but