

Abolish All Prisons!

BAD Broadside #2

The federal, state, and local governments in the united states are in the business of locking up huge numbers of people. There are more prisoners in this country, per capita, than anywhere else on earth. In 1992, there were almost 1,400,000 people incarcerated here, with approximately 925,000 persons in federal and state prisons and 444,000 in local jails. These numbers, a 6% increase over 1991 figures, are up from 200,000 and 150,000, respectively, in 1972. The prison population is growing many times faster than the general population, as authorities all over the country build more and more prisons and plan to lock up more and more people. Despite this, violent crime continues to affect the lives of many people, as does police harassment and violence. Additionally, large numbers of prisoners (as many as 63% in california and over 70% in ohio) end up back in jail after they serve their time because they return to their prior activities. Locking people up does not prevent or deter crime, and does not keep those locked up from repeating their offenses.

Punishment, not rehabilitation, is clearly the mission of prisons. In prison, besides being deprived of their freedom to move about as they please, people are abused and harassed by both guards and other prisoners. They are treated as children are usually treated in outside society, and then expected to behave like responsible adults at the end of their sentences. Prisoners are forced to work for no or minimal pay and are often coerced into working in especially dangerous, and sometimes fatal, work, like fighting fires and cleaning up oil spills. Beating, raping, intimidating, enslaving, and infantilizing people produces not caring, non-violent people, but angry, hostile, often violence-prone ones. Besides being ineffective in preventing crime, abusing people who commit crimes is unjust. When escaped prisoners are found years later living crime-free lives under new names, demonstrating that they have reformed, they are usually returned to prison to finish their sentences, and even have years added on as punishment for escaping. This is nothing but vengefulness on the part of cops and courts, not an attempt to protect others from criminals. Whatever offenses people have committed, it is inhuman and vicious to turn around and abuse them in turn. There are other, more just and less cruel, ways to deal with people who are now locked up.

Most people in prison are there for committing offenses not involving violence, and many of these are there for activities that harm no one, or least no one other than themselves, in any way, and should not be of any concern to the government or any one else. Many people are in jail for selling, using, or transporting illegal drugs, engaging in or soliciting for sex in exchange for money, or having consensual sex with people younger than themselves, of the same sex as themselves, or in ways of which the state disapproves. These activities are non-coercive and non-violent and should not be the business of anyone but the participants. Violence is sometimes associated with some of these activities, but that is because the government has illegalized them and driven them underground. Decriminalizing these voluntary activities would solve that problem. As for those offenses involving harm to a person, but not violence, like robbery, some sort of restitution makes more sense than imprisonment.

Even for those who have committed violence against other people, prison is clearly not the solution. It does not deter murder, rape, battery, etc, and may, in fact, promote their repetition. The only way to prevent violent crime is to enable people to defend themselves against it. One way to accomplish this is to eliminate anti-gun laws so that people can defend themselves against others who may attack them. Relying on police has been shown to be ineffective in preventing violence against people, and the existence of these police forces has been used as a justification for disarming individuals, especially poor and/or black people. Besides this, police themselves are responsible for much of the violence against people that occurs. Handgun possession, especially by women, has been shown to be an effective deterrent to violent crime. When Orlando, florida, conducted a program where 6000 women learned to use and carried handguns, and the program was widely publicized, the incidence of rape there dropped 90% at a time when rape was dramatically increasing elsewhere.

Like most statist institutions, prisons are both ineffective and unjust. The only humane way to deal with the problem of prisons is to abolish them, and allow people, as individuals or in groups, according to their own preference, to organize their own self-defense against violence and theft.

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