

THE U.S. PRISON SYSTEM FAILS PRISONERS

BY KLAUDIA WACHNIK

For many decades, it has been known how poor the current U.S. prison system is for inmates. It can be argued that many of the conditions experienced in prisons are inhumane and seek to tear each individual apart. While prison in itself is a grueling experience for many prisoners, life immediately after release proves to be a significant challenge, too. For a system that claims to push people out as better individuals, statistically, it does the exact opposite. According to the National Institute of Justice, 76.6% of prisoners return within five years. The prison system in the U.S. sets ex-inmates up to fail after their release and does not reduce recidivism, but rather inadvertently promotes it.

While there is language surrounding the prison system that the desired narrative is to rehabilitate prisoners, the reality experienced by a large majority of prisoners in the U.S. is the opposite. Internally throughout the system, and externally by those who view prisoners as outcasts, harsh conditions a punishment-oriented environment counter-productive to rehabilitation.

The Eighth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution protects prisoners against cruel and unusual punishment. Currently, violence runs rampant in prisons and leaves many prisoners at risk if they have not already faced harsh assault. While the violence may be done by other prisoners, that does not



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mean that officers and those operating the prison do not have a responsibility to give prisoners adequate medical care and to deter this violence. In a 1976 Supreme Court case, *Estelle v. Gamble*, it was ruled that any prison staff's "deliberate indifference" to a "prisoner's serious illness or injury" is considered cruel and unusual. Although this ruling was made decades ago, there is still a vast amount of unchecked violence in prisons, and rather than deterring or aiding in injury recovery, many prisoners are being ignored or put in solitary confinement as "protection."

These practices are reinforced by understaffed prisons, and classification issues only aid in increasing violence. Due to this prominent violence, offenders often leave prison more aggressive than when they entered.

According to Mental Health America, over half of Americans in jail or prison have a mental illness. For every mental illness, there is specific care and treatment that is needed in order to effectively manage symptoms. Prison staff and officials often will fail to provide the needed treatment

by guiding the prisoners to mental health professionals within the system. When symptoms begin to "spiral" out of control or cause some sort of disruption in the prison, rather than receiving adequate care and treatment, prisoners will typically face physical force and/or solitary confinement. These factors do nothing but aggravate mental illness in most cases.

Beyond just mental illness, many prisoners also experience substance use issues, and do not get the care and treatment that they need. In many prisons substance use runs rampant and is unchecked by prison staff and officials. According to The Marshall Project, former and current staff and prisoners have said that drugs enter prisons through visitors, packages and letters, and corrupt prison staff. - This was especially prevalent during the COVID-19 pandemic.

While prison serves as its own grueling process, life immediately out of prison proves to be incredibly difficult in its own ways. Parole conditions vary from state to state, however there is a collective set of parole expectations that are fairly consistent throughout the nation. Simmons University lays out these typical conditions, which include remaining within the same geographic area, receiving permission to change residence, maintaining consistent employment, prohibition from possessing firearms, paying parole fees, submitting to searches from parole officers at any time under any circumstance, not drinking alcohol whatsoever or not being present in bars and strict adherence to federal and state laws.

Coupled with these parole conditions, The American Bar Association's National Inventory of the Collateral Consequences of Conviction lists 47,442 different collateral consequences of incarceration. While some of the consequences are explicit and straight-forward in their terms, others are often very much up

to interpretation of legal officials.

Parole expectations and collateral consequences contain strict guidelines that can be hard to navigate, especially when individuals are expected to operate seemingly smoothly. Human life is complex, and incredibly difficult to navigate when there are various systemic and infrastructural roadblocks coupled with an experience such as prison.

There is also a lack of aid and support in the transition back to society. Many ex-prisoners experience being immediately thrust back into society, which can be a challenging space to navigate after experiencing prison. According to an Urban Institute study of Baltimore-area prisoners from Simmons University, ex-prisoners found that they relied on their family much more than they previously anticipated they would after prison, and found it difficult to find a job that could provide them enough finances to live securely. Only about half of the prisoners found their parole officer to be helpful during their transition back to society.

According to criminal justice scholars Francis T. Cullen, Cheryl Lero Jonson, and Daniel S. Nagin, "With some confidence, we can conclude that, across all offenders, prisons do not have a specific deterrent effect. Custodial sentences do not reduce recidivism more than noncustodial sanctions."

The United States prison system is set up for punishment rather than a chance at rehabilitation.