
Guest Commentary / 'Corrections' system

Jailing petty criminals outmoded, ineffective

By **Richard Ekstedt**

I worked for four years as a physician assistant in what was then known as the Seattle/King County jails. At that time our jail population was similar in numbers and types of charges/arrests to the Snohomish County jail today. The PA's working within the King County Corrections system were predominantly former expert military medics, trained through the MEDEX Northwest Program out of the University of Washington. Most of the medics and custody officers were reasonably sure that jailing a person for stealing a six-pack of beer, and many other petty crimes, wouldn't exist in the future, that jails and prisons would only be used to incarcerate the most harmful offenders. The reason that we felt that jails would no longer serve as a form of punishment is that it was obvious it doesn't work.

Here we are 40 years later with the same laws and regulations for incarceration and jails that are a little prettier but functionally inferior to the facilities we used in the '70s. Through negligence and malpractice people have been dying in the Snohomish County Jail and that is, apparently, what it takes for us to make some noise, walk around in circles, and continue to support the same nonfunctional system for another 100 years. Incarcerating people for petty crimes is not only non-functional, but it is self-perpetuating, costing the taxpayer unbelievable amounts of money to train criminals (the jails are a potent education system for the advancement of criminals; if you're not a criminal when you go to jail you will be when you get out.)

While working in the King County Corrections System, (a nomenclature later given to jails that then and today have nothing at all to do with corrections) the Medical Staff would make rounds of the jail every four hours to distribute medication and to actually see each inmate, giving him a chance to voice physical complaints. We would usually visit holding cells/drunken tanks every two hours since the most critical time for many inmates is on booking. This is a lot of work, but when you have a recidivism rate of around 70 percent, you get to know everybody, their medical record, and have a pretty good idea of what to expect. In my four years I don't remember anyone dying in jail.

Dr. Stuart Henry (Professor and Chair of Interdisciplinary Studies, College of Urban, Labor and Metropolitan Affairs Wayne State University) is one of the many academics studying the crime of jails. After years of study, his recommendations are:

"First, We need to consider ceasing the use of prison as punishment. Incapacitating the most seriously harmful offenders is a different argument.

"Second, we should draw on the research of what we know works to prevent recidivism, especially literacy programs, skills training and GED, as well as educating prisoners to the associates degree level in higher education and restore financial support for these successful practices.

"Third, we should train corrections officers to be *corrections* officers rather than guards, and if that means to train them to be effective and qualified teachers, then this would be money well spent.

"Fourth, we should invest the money spent on incarceration on ensuring that the illiteracy rate among the nations population is reduced dramatically. Doing so will enable them to make better choices in the first place.

"Finally, we should abandon the discourse of punishment as our response to unwanted behavior. It doesn't work for parrots and it doesn't work for people."

I was appalled when the county spent \$100 million on a new jail. Can you imagine the good we could have done with that money? Perhaps if we did something constructive with the hundreds of petty cases clogging our dockets we wouldn't be talking about wasting \$150 million on a new court house.

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