

Opinion: The failure of the prison system

By Ted Long

That our prisons are overflowing with inmates to the point that the system is breaking down, the fact that the prisons are now mostly run by inmate gangs and that recidivism is at record highs has caused some to begin to look at the issue and the underlying logic of a system that was born in medieval times and other than in the use of construction materials, has remained mostly unchanged in its justification for hundreds of years.

At the root of the system, in its origins and still today are three fundamental reasons or justifications for prison. First, is the early and still deep-rooted concept of revenge. If some one breaks the law they have to go to jail so we extract our once of justice.

The second is the notion that we can rehabilitate or should rehabilitate the individual. A concept, that despite the fact that it as been proven not to work in the majority of case is still near and dear to us.



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The third is the notion of a deterrent, that an individual will consider the penalties and in weighing them or perhaps just respecting them will not commit the crime because of the

penalty. We see reflections of this in our law, crimes of passion and the mentally unstable are given greater license for example.

The first justification, revenge, I leave to you. Revenge is often greatly reflected in society's values and I would like to think that as a society we have evolved beyond such primitive thinking. However?

The second issue, however, requires a closer look. The fact is that there are a few that do benefit but, the combination of some educational opportunities and industrial training with our knee-jerk reaction to the fact that a person is a convicted criminal makes rehabilitation a double edged sword. A study that I conducted with inmates from Lompoc Federal Prison demonstrated that dilemma. Lompoc had one of the best welder training schools in the country; it trained real good welders. The new welders served their time while learning their new trade, came out and then could not get work because the stigma of convict overweighed their ability to perform the job and they could not get work. The result, increased resentment of society and a reinforced belief the crime was their only opportunity. Think about it, would you hire an ex-con?

The third is even more interesting. The fear of prison versus doing the right thing. In its origin I think there might have been something to it; however prisons were completely different then. I do think that the fear of jail may work best on those of us who are not going to commit a crime anyway, we have no need, other then wanting to punch someone in the nose occasionally, but fear of getting punched back is probably stronger. However, if you look at the percentages in the current prison population what you will find is an overwhelming number of people with nothing or very little to loose, in fact jail may actually be a better place then where they were living.

Imagine, you are a young man, living in a ghetto, a neighborhood where it is dangerous to go out on the street, you go to bed many nights hungry and despite the boasting of the wonderfulness of the "American way" you face little opportunity to improve yourself. You have not only the worst schools but going to school is a major threat. Surrounded by violence and pain, are you really deterred by the fact that you may go to jail? Where you will get first class medical help, an education, and three square meals a day and if you are tough enough, respect?

I don't think so, and I am not even including the peer presser, the fear of your own life if you do not cooperate with the criminal element.

Like many institutions that have been given to us from the past, we need to rethink them with current conditions. Our prisons, our educational systems, our ways of financing government even the application of our sacred constitution, may be making a greater contributors to our problems than we realize or are willing to omit.

We live in times that have no history, never has progress been so fast and so unpredictable. What was science fiction when I was in high school is today's standard. Our current prison system is not working.

The point is, what's wrong with an honest relook at the whys and ways we do things?

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