

Prison Reform and the Piggy Bank

In our Utopian vision of “heaven on earth”, America, referred to in more irreverent circles as “Incarceration Nation”, has built county, state and federal corrections into a huge growth industry fully backed by bureaucrats, lobbyists and tens of millions of self-righteous bloggers. With one in every hundred citizens incarcerated at a cost of upwards of \$60,000 per year each, “Tough-on-Crime” has created political careers, job security and the Patriot Act without a single shot being fired.

That is, until the Supreme Court ruled in 2011 to force California to reduce its prison population to 110,000 by releasing 33,000 inmates over 2 years.¹ Two years later, the shell game having shifted to now-overcrowded county jails and private prisons yielding super returns on invested capital, the problem was declared solved by Gov. Jerry Brown². “Not so fast, Governor!”

10,000 Back on the Streets:

On Election Day, Nov. 4, 2014, the people spoke, not because they suddenly had become soft on crime but because corrections is getting to be too expensive and too personal. Prop 47, a citizens’ referendum to reclassify several nonviolent drug and property crimes from felony to misdemeanor, garnered a 58.5% majority vote. Targeted are personal drug possession and petty theft. The potential of this measure is to secure the release of some 10,000 felons from state prisons³. Savings of hundreds of millions of dollars are intended to be re-directed to crime prevention programs in K-12 schools, to assistance for victims of crime, and for mental health and drug treatment programs.

Opposition to Prop 47 centered primarily on three fears – the presumed mandated early release of those currently serving sentences for petty crime but with violent priors, reduced penalties for shoplifting, and a reduction of the penalty for possession of drugs used to facilitate date rape. The question hangs in the air, “With 10,000 newly-released felons on the street, will this measure simply shift the burden from Corrections to law enforcement?” Only experience will answer that question. With the track record of government solving social problems, however, my guess is, “Yes”.

Major Logjam of Opting Out:

Call it “freedom”, call it “choice”, call it mental illness, call it anything you want; we have created a major logjam of people opting out of the American Dream. Prison reform is beginning to look a lot like the movement to close mental hospitals that accelerated in the 1980’s. We used to lock ‘em up and throw away the key – bad enough. The alternative option was to dump them out onto the streets and into our jails and prisons. Meanwhile, the most self-conscious counter-cultural force in America – the Church – failed to step up to the plate and, to this day, is standing flat-footed and slack mouthed outside the revolving door of crime.

A big contributor to the problem is the public’s self-righteous attitude toward mental illness:

¹ Don Thompson, *Supreme Court Upholds Order for California to Cut Prison Population*, *Huffington Post*, 5/23/2011. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/05/23/supreme-court-orders-cali_n_865503.html

² Wyatt Buchanan & Egelko, *Jerry Brown Says Prison Emergency Over*, *SFGATE*, 01/08/2013. <http://www.sfgate.com/news/article/Jerry-Brown-says-prison-emergency-over-4177497.php>

³ <http://www.voterguide.sos.ca.gov/en/propositions/47/>

A 1996 survey found that 71% of people believed that mental illness was due to emotional weakness, 65% thought it was caused by bad parenting, 45% believed it was the person's fault and 35% believed it was the consequence of sinful behavior. Only 10% thought it had a biological basis. Clearly these attitudes increase the difficulty of people's willingness to obtain the treatment, services and supports needed for recovery⁴.

Prop 47 is not prison reform, any more than "urban renewal" will solve social blight. The problem simply emerges elsewhere. We move the deck chairs on the Titanic because we don't seem to know how to save the ship.

The Columbia Street Project:

The Columbia Street Project, a separate 501(c)(3) corporation created by the Columbia Street Baptist Church in Bangor, ME, is struggling to face head-on the social blight that has gripped our community. We can no longer feed the hungry without teaching the hungry to feed themselves. We can no longer provide welfare assistance without teaching basic social skills to prepare people successfully to apply for jobs. We can no longer sing worship songs and lift our hands in praise to God while a sea of humanity staggers under patronizing ignorance right outside our doors.

The Church in America is intended as a beacon of light and hope. With rare exceptions, it has turned inward, focusing on prosperity and success at the expense of physical, emotional and spiritual healing. Unless the Church becomes a true counter-cultural force to politics in America, its future as we have come to know it is in serious doubt.

We Have Created the Problem:

It is we, the privileged citizens of America, who have created this problem. By succumbing to a culture of fear and believing in the power of government or money to solve all social problems, we have left unattended a ticking time bomb that is touching the lives of us all and threatens our way of life.

Our God is involved in the lives of the poor and dispossessed and calls the Church to be a refuge of hope. Prison reform will arise from an acute consciousness of God's people toward prisoners-as-people, rather than as statistics. "...for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and frolic like newborn calves" (Malachi 4:2).

Emphasis on "you will go out"!

⁴ Sue Abderholden, *Changes in the Mental Health System*, Council on Crime and Justice, Minneapolis, 2005. <http://www.crimeandjustice.org/councilinfo.cfm?pid=55>

