

Corrections Communities: An Environment for Change

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Abstract

Media coverage of crime and corrections has caused a negative public opinion. Effective reforms are needed. This research paper argues that self-contained and mostly self-sufficient corrections communities may offer a better environment for change and cost less. A minimal investment in housing and increased training of prisoners would result in parolees with a desire and potential for success. Residential relocation coupled with employment agreements offer the parolee a legitimate second chance in society.

Introduction

According to the media and the platforms of recent political campaigns, Americans consider crime their greatest concern. Politicians are clearly listening to this expressed anxiety as evidenced by the variety of crime bills floating in the congress; for example, "Three strikes and you're out."

The recent media saturation concerning crime reflects negatively on corrections. Public opinion about early release programs, minimum sentences, and prison environment is becoming a driving force for change.

How should we, the experts, respond to this sudden notoriety? Should we stand on "that's the way we've always done it?" Or should we move to the next generation of corrections? And what should we change?

Background

Facts indicate that after three decades of lock 'em up fever in America, we are still faced with insufficient jail/prison cells. Robert Gangi, Executive Director of the Correctional Association of New York, warns, "Building more prisons to address crime is like building more graveyards to address a fatal disease." Attempts to jail our way out of the crime problem has discouraging results. The number of federal and state inmates has doubled to 950,000 and the local jail population has nearly tripled to 450,000 (Lacayo & Smolowe, 1994).

Few citizens realize the high cost of housing prisoners. Average annual cost per inmate is \$23,500. The cost per bed in a maximum security facility is \$74,862. Howard Peters, Illinois Director of Corrections, says, "You don't lock them up and throw away the key. You lock them up and spend thousands of dollars on them" (Lacayo & Smolowe, 1994).

The cost of keeping a prisoner incarcerated from age 50 to 70 is approximately \$460,000 (Lacayo & Smolowe, 1994). The propensity and often the ability to commit crimes is greatly reduced by this age (Maur, 1994).

Criminal justice professionals and many academicians feel that trying to control crime through tougher sentences is a doomed effort because the criminal justice system can

never be large enough. With the continued increase in inmate population, shrinking federal, state and local budgets are being rapidly depleted. This has renewed the interest in making the inmate population more productive in work release and industry programs. This would enable the corrections departments to defer some costs by charging reasonable fees for room, board, medical services, clothing, and other costs to the inmate.

Alternative Solutions

Prisoners should be made to be more responsible and held accountable for their behavior. The idea that prisoners owe a debt to society seems to be lost on a society that provides and pays for all the prisoner's needs.

Maybe there is an alternative sentencing that will work for the prisoner and for society. What would we need? A means of isolating the offenders without exorbitant cost to the public is the answer.

Known violent prisoners, whether they committed one or more violent crimes, can be evaluated by a panel of psychiatrists and criminologists to determine the extent of their retribution. The only consideration for persons convicted of these types of crime is life in a maximum security institution or the death sentence. According to a survey done by Corrections Compendium, this would involve approximately 4.6 % of the prison population in 1994 and 1995 (Lillis, 1994). There are probably more than sufficient existing facilities to meet this need well into the future.

There is another 14.6 % of the incarcerated population that has special needs such as chronic illnesses, mental health issues, and certain handicaps requiring constant medical attention (Lillis, 1994). They would be housed in designated medical institutions such as the current medical and reception centers.

The above two categories encompass 19.2 % of the total inmate population. This leaves 80.8% of prisoners classified as medium to minimum security custody with acceptable medical and mental capabilities to function in a general population.

The Corrections Community Model

To create corrections communities, current institutions can be remodeled to house medium and minimum custody prisoners. Closed military bases might also be used. In rethinking the function of the corrections institution, a parallel society is created. The initial cost to complete the "community" model should be recouped by the forced self-sufficient citizens housed in each community. Other assumed costs would be raw materials not otherwise available.

A perimeter of natural barriers would be the ideal but in lieu of this, force fields that would stun the violator at 15 feet of their set limits can be used. Should the prisoner withstand the initial stun, at 10 feet, he/she would receive a second electrical shock sufficient to disable. The final barrier would render the subject unconscious. Though this may sound excessive, armed officers are now prepared to shoot these same individuals. The new method is definitely more desirable.

Each corrections community would have all necessary plants, equipment, training/schooling, religious dwellings, and other facilities to be self-contained. The prisoners would be required to attain a GED if he/she did not have a high school diploma. This minimum required education would be accomplished prior to leaving the reception center and entering the community. Aptitude tests would also be given to identify the best placement of each prisoner in the community. Initially the members of the community would be trained by teachers/trainers/experts for their assigned tasks prior to entering the community. Once this has been completed, these primary residents would assume the role of teacher/trainer for the new arrivals. The incentive to become adept and then share knowledge will be the desire to survive, to have some semblance of a "normal" life.

Residents of the community will operate their own power plants, sewage plants, emergency, and medical response units; food will be grown/raised by members, processed, prepared and delivered to the community. The corrections community would parallel society as closely as possible. In order to encourage the prisoners with more than primal needs, there would be social programs afforded to those residents who adequately fulfill their obligation and special rewards for those who excel.

Originally residents will live in dorms/barracks. This is the most economical way to house large numbers. However, each community will also have some private dwellings which can be earned by outstanding performance. Both the dorms/barracks and the single dwelling housing will be maintained by the inhabitants.

Residents who have qualified for the private housing will be allowed one weekend a month that their family can stay with them from Friday evening to Sunday afternoon. The barrack residents can have family visits, but not overnight. All members can have supervised visits four times each week.

In order to also instill financial awareness in these prisoners, they will have their own special currency. These monetary units will pay for services rendered and can be used to pay for food, housing, clothing, electricity, water, medical, and other services. Prisoners will be taught how to budget and financially plan for the future.

The prisoners will be encouraged to take correspondence courses to continue their education. Any prisoner who has been confined for seven years, qualified for private residence, and completed at least a two year degree will be considered for parole. There will be no exceptions to these standards as minimums.

When a prisoner is eligible to be released from this special directed community, he/she and his/her family members will join with a designated counselor to determine the relocation of the prisoner and the family unit. By re-entering society in a new location, the prisoner will have a better opportunity to succeed at being a productive citizen.

A satellite with sensitivity equipment that can read an individual's DNA characteristics would be placed to constantly monitor the location of all parolees. FDLE has already started collecting DNA information for a database. Technology, both in genetics and computerized satellites, is progressing rapidly. The individual's DNA characteristics would be linked to the satellite. Date, time, and specific location would be available about any parolee upon request. Knowing this data is available to law enforcement will influence the individual not to participate in more crime. All known offenders are almost guaranteed of being arrested and prosecuted.

Repeat offenders would serve a minimum of seven years in a maximum security institution and ineligible for the corrections communities. If their behavior meets all acceptable standards, they will be allowed to return to the corrections community. The "community" process would start over requiring another seven years, qualifying for private residence, and completing another two year degree program.

The current corrections staff will become more specialized. They will act as the police, the teachers, the mediators and the contact to the outside world.

The education and other accomplishments completed during the incarceration period will fail unless there are opportunities available to the parolee upon release. The government and all tax funded employers would be obligated to hire a percentage of these parolee applicants that meet or exceed the position criteria. They would be included in the "protected class" definition of Equal Opportunity Employment. Private industry would be encouraged to participate by contractual agreement for placement of parolees.

Conclusion

The onset of new crime bills and the public's sentiment that current corrections practices are not working are reason to evaluate our methods and consider changing tactics. The self-sufficiency of a corrections community coupled with the incentives for self-improvement can build an environment that is more conducive for change. Efforts to succeed will be reinforced if parolees know their whereabouts can be accessed at any time with an increased probability of arrest and prosecution if they commit another crime. Residential relocation and employment positions will increase the potential for parolees to transition into society.

Responsibility for self, to others and for the quality of one's life can be learned. The corrections community would provide the opportunity for this personal training.

Recommendations

Classification criteria would need to be developed to determine who qualifies for the corrections community model. The procedure should allow for the greatest prisoner participation without endangering citizens, staff, or the other prisoners.

The remodeling of the institution and military bases would be evaluated by corrections professionals and architects. The needed construction would be accomplished by the use of inmate labor. Corrections staff identified to participate in this program will be specially trained to meet the needs of the corrections community.

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