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What is Prison Reform in the United States?

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this thesis is to discuss and examine the flaws in the prison industrial system here in the United States. Through thorough research and more importantly conversations with currently and formerly incarcerated individuals, it has become evident that the punitive nature of the jails and prisons inside the United States have only served to hurt a community of people who need help to get their lives back on track. These punishments have created a cycle of incarceration that is a huge factor in the phenomenon known as mass incarceration. In examining models from other countries, specifically in Europe, it can be assumed that there are effective methods in rehabilitating the incarcerated population to reestablish them into normal society. It can be concluded from this thesis that while it may take a massive cultural shift in the United States, reframing the goals of our jails and prisons from punishment oriented to restorative and rehabilitative will decrease the amount of people that return to these jails and prisons after being released a first time.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
Chapter 1 Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2 Conversations with Community around Incarceration	7
Chapter 3 Prison Structure Research.....	14
Chapter 4 Counter Arguments.....	25
Chapter 5 Response.....	28
Chapter 6 Conclusion	29
BIBLIOGRAPHY	31

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Recidivism Rates by Demographic 2005-2010.....	2
Figure 2. How much each State Spends on Prisons	5
Figure 3. Education Affects Recidivism.....	11
Figure 4. 13th Amendment.....	15

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The United States currently houses over two million incarcerated men and women inside their jails and prisons. According to the *World Population Review*, that equates to roughly 25% of the world's prison population.

Prisons in the United States were originally created with the intention of rehabilitating those in society that committed crimes. They were deemed as troubles to society that needed time to reflect on their behavior before they could return to the rest of the population.

JStor contributor Livia Gershon attests that before the 1800s, the only punishments that existed in the United States were like that of England, public beatings and executions for breaking the law. However, as reform took place in England, it happened here as well. In the early 1800s, penitentiaries were opened with the idea that character could be reformed in return for labor that would make money for the state. While in these penitentiaries, they completed trivial tasks such as “textile work, nail making, and housekeeping” (Gershon, 2018). The monotonous tasks provided ample opportunity for those incarcerated to think about what they needed to do to reinstate themselves back into normal life.

Today, men and women across the United States are sent to prison every day for a range of crimes ranging from minor drug possession offenses to serious murder cases. Once inside, the men and women need assistance to overcome drug addictions and cope with severe mental health problems. Instead, our US prison systems have created toxic environments that exacerbate these problems instead of curing them. As a result, most of the men and women are released after

servicing their time back onto the streets where they have become worse off than they were when they first went in.

According to the US Department of Justice, around 700,000 incarcerated men and women are released every year. In total, roughly 95% of men and women that are incarcerated will be released back on the street. Unfortunately, many of these unrehabilitated men and women will return to jail or prison within three years of their release.

Recidivism is the tendency of a convicted criminal to reoffend. The United States has the highest recidivism rate in the world at 77% as of 2022 (Sipes, 2022). The men and women on the inside are treated literally and figuratively like animals. They are caged with four walls meant to crush the life that exists within them and create a robot that is only responsive to orders and commands. Then they are released into the world with no real plan of how to go forward in the right way.

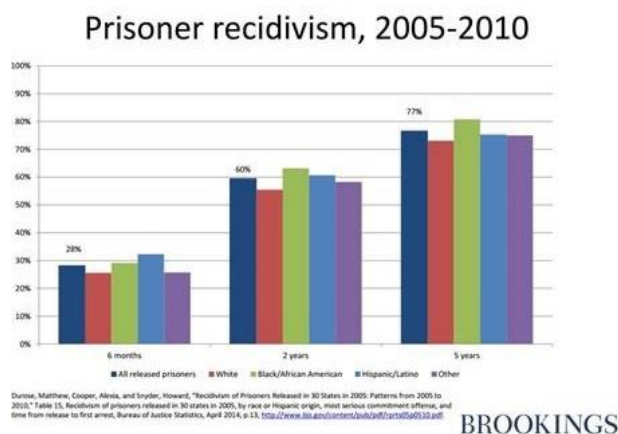


Figure 1. Recidivism Rates by Demographic 2005-2010

Source: Galston & McElvein (2016)

Mass incarceration is directly contributing to the country's high recidivism rates. It is as simple as people that have a health problem are being locked away for a time before being

released back into the real world before their sickness was ever addressed. Once released, they are expected to behave as if the unaddressed health problem had been solved; if their behavior deviates from the standards of the law, the system is waiting and ready to jump on them to lock them back away and continue the cycle.

To fix these problems, conversations around prison reform have come to the forefront of society. Prison reform movements are aimed at correcting prisons' policies and methods to see better results. Better results can be characterized as lower recidivism rates and smaller prison populations.

Different prison reform movements have been discussed for many years now as there are differing opinions on how to effectively correct a system that has been rooted in society for a long time now. There is general reform, restorative justice, and outright abolition. All three take an unconventional approach to directly address the needs of the men and women that have been incarcerated.

Restorative Justice is an interesting approach to rehabilitation. Restorative justice involves bringing the perpetrator of a crime to the table to reconcile with the victim and then the larger community.

According to Lindsey Pointer, an associate director at the National Center of Restorative Justice, instead of punishing someone as a way of seeking justice, a more productive outlook is to “repair” the harm that has been caused (Pointer, 2021).

Champions of restorative justice believe that when a crime is committed, all parties involved have needs that need to be met to move on in a healthy manner from the incident. Someone just rotting in jail or prison for years does not resolve the needs of anyone involved and therefore is counterproductive.

An extreme argument of prison reform is prison abolition, as in getting rid of all the prisons. Prison abolitionists argue that the structure and history of the United States will not allow prisons to ever be successful in rehabilitation. Instead, they believe it is important to instill community leaders and investments that police themselves and their community and create the resources necessary to keep everyone safe and healthy.

General prison reforms inside the prison are the most effective solutions.

The money is there to invest in the prisons. According to the US Department of Justice, \$68 billion is spent every year on federal, state, and local corrections. The money needs to be diverted from wherever it is currently going and put into programs that will provide the men and women on the inside the help they need to get their life back on track.

How Much do States Spend on Prisons?

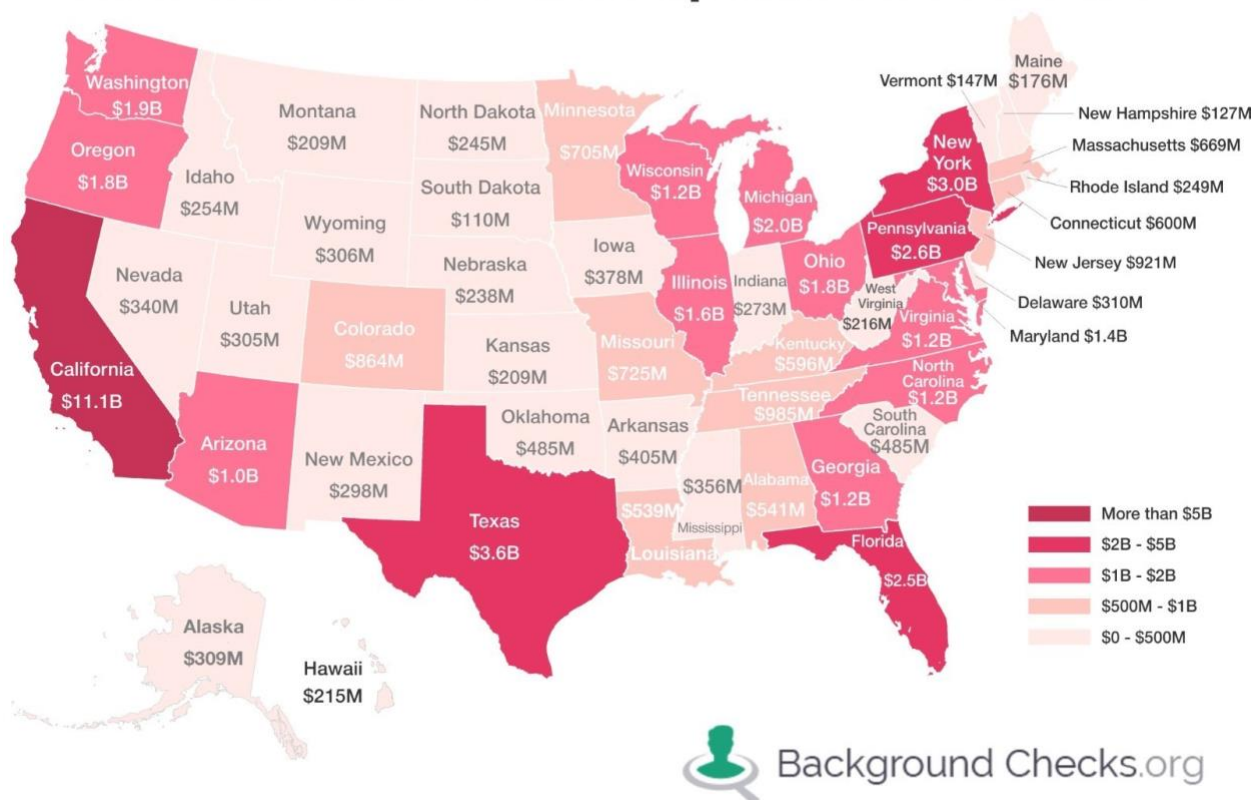


Figure 2. How much each State Spends on Prisons.

Source: BackgroundChecks.org (2015)

There must be a real commitment from officials to acknowledge what problems exist and wanting to fix them to create a healthier and more productive environment on the inside.

The best way to fix US prisons without getting rid of them is to address the structures that exist. This starts with the basics of treating the men and women on the inside more like humans with the idea that they come out treating those around them the same.

In this project, I will explain how prisons operate in other parts of the world and attempt to explain why these models would serve to be just as effective here in the United States. Through research and qualitative conversations, I have had with currently and formerly incarcerated people, I believe that prison reform in the United States needs to cater to the needs

of the men and women on the inside by providing the resources and structure they need to rehabilitate.

Chapter 2

Conversations with Community around Incarceration

Over the last year, I have been fortunate enough to watch, read about, meet, interview, and spend time with currently and formerly incarcerated individuals. On the outside, we have a million ideas and thoughts on what the men and women on the inside need. However, most of the work I have done involves communicating with people who have been or are currently still inside and asking them directly what it is they need to change their lives around.

At New Jersey State Prison lives Tariq Maqbool where he has been incarcerated for some time now. While listening to him speak over the phone from inside, I was struck by the honesty and thoughtful nature he spoke with, a theme I find to be common amongst all the incarcerated people I have spoken with or listened to. He concedes that while “there’s a shame with being in prison,” he has tried to remain authentic and be proud of who he is (or who he has become). He speaks about defining your own narrative despite what is being thrown onto you for the flaws you have in your life. Aside from his optimism and wisdom, Maqbool notes that generations of families are being torn apart because of the policies of jails and prisons. With conjugal visits allowed only in four states as of 2015 (California, Connecticut, New York, Washington), generations of family units have been broken up and discontinued. Even today the system is not designed to address the natural sexual urges and desires for their respective partners the men and women have inside; instead, these reunions have been rebranded as family reunion times meant just for spending supervised time with family.

By providing incarcerated individuals opportunities to express their sexual urges, you are allowing them to release pent up energy that is often expressed through violence and frustration directed at the wrong targets.

Here in Centre County is Centre County Correctional Facility, or CCCF for short. In the Fall of 2022, I had the opportunity to take a prison journalism class alongside five other Penn State students and four men that were incarcerated at the time. This opportunity was my first chance to see up close what it is like to live your everyday life inside a jail or prison.

The men offered incredible insight on life inside and what the day-to-day is like for them. They also provided detailed insight into many of the shortcomings that they ran into inside. The biggest theme over the semester was mental health. It is no secret that many incarcerated men and women struggle with mental illness.

According to a Weill Cornell Medicine study, there are more than three times the amount of people with mental illness currently incarcerated than there are in psychiatric institutions, and the rate of severe mental illness in jails is around 24% (Wolff, 2017).

The men at CCCF told us they saw a psychiatrist once a month and instead of getting real help, they got a band-aid with prescribed drugs that admittedly will have lasting effects on them as they grow dependent on them to survive every day inside. For them, it was such a relief to be able to speak openly and vulnerable without the fear of consequences that the two-hour classes sessions we had felt like real therapy. The men cited that having the space to talk freely eased their minds and they believed it would be beneficial for all people incarcerated because it would take the edge and tension away that comes with always having to watch over your shoulder.

In loosening everyone up, you start to heal the trauma these people have experienced inside, and you set them up to at least be able to behave normally once they are released back into the world.

One man in CCCF shared that because of how on edge he was from being deprived of his family (alluding back to Mr. Maqbool's point) and having to be always on alert, he was afraid of

how he would react to seeing his grandson again for the first time when the child inevitable runs up to him; he is fearful he will have a negative response that is a result of instinctual behavior he learned while inside. To shorten a long point, mental health services are at the top of the list for what men and women need on the inside to be successful once they are released.

On a much smaller scale, the men in CCCF also complained of the hygiene services. When they did not have enough money to buy better products on their commissary (another problem that exists inside), they were given indigent kits that had bare minimum things to survive. However, the quality of the product was so poor that it could hardly last them long enough to properly take care of themselves.

While something like hygiene seems so miniscule and unimportant to the plight of the reason you are incarcerated, it does play into the point that to really rehabilitate these men and women, you must treat them like the humans they are. The inhumane treatment is demoralizing and makes many people just accept the narrative that is being written for them.

Of course, there are success stories. Colin Rea is one of these. Colin was arrested aged only 18-years-old for multiple armed robberies around Halloween 2012. Colin grew up in a home where his father was abusive, and he had no real direction in life after completing high school. Needing money, Colin committed a handful of armed robberies during a week and by the end of the week had been arrested. He ended up serving seven years in different jails in prisons here in Pennsylvania.

Despite the trauma from his upbringing and the challenges he faced while inside, Colin was able to turn his life around through sheer will to be a better person. He accepted responsibility for his actions and committed to going back into his community and making a difference to give back from a community he stole from.

Today, Colin is a Tik Tok influencer with almost three million followers; this platform has given him the ability to comfortably provide for his family while also enjoying his newfound freedom.

While Colin's story may seem great, and it is a success story, the social media part fell into his lap by luck when he posted a video that went viral and was able to amass a large following during the lockdown months of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, in speaking to Colin I learned that this lifestyle was more than unexpected.

As previously mentioned, Colin only reached up to a high school education. Combine that with the fact that he is also a registered felon, and there were few opportunities readily available for him upon his release.

Before the pandemic began, Colin worked as a carpenter for about a year where he made minimum wage. In reflecting on his time inside, Colin admits that his time inside would have been much more productive if he could have gotten a college degree while serving his time.

According to a study done by the RAND Review, incarcerated men and women who participate in an education program are 43% less likely to reoffend once they have been released (Irving, 2016).

The education not only gives them a shift in their focus while they are inside, but it also makes finding a job when they are released that much easier, providing stability for them in the outside world, something many people do not have when they are released and is a main cause of why people commit crimes again.

Not only is education beneficial for those receiving it, but also economically it creates a better return on investment versus the alternative of continuing to pay for someone to be incarcerated. Already a costly business, (over \$80 a day per person according to the US

Department of Justice) the [RAND report](#) found that providing education to incarcerated individuals is proven to save four dollars for every one dollar spent over three years.



Figure 3. Education Affects Recidivism

These claims are not from studies and reports done alone though. There exists real tangible evidence, such as PBS' *College Behind Bars* documentary, that show education is making a huge difference in the lives of these men and women.

The documentary follows men and women inside two New York correctional facilities as they participate in [Bard's Prison Initiative](#). The best thing the documentary does is show the change in attitude and self-esteem being a part of the program has caused for each of its members. The feeling of purpose and belonging is what encourages the men and women in the

documentary to do better for themselves, regardless of whether they were getting out soon or further along down the road.

I had the opportunity to speak with Dr. Michael J. Thomas of the United States Marshals Service during my research and was able to get the perspective of someone who has worked on the other side of the cell in this system. While he expressed that I was correct in my concerns, he admitted it is a difficult system to change primarily because of the culture that exists in our society. That said, he gave me information that I did not know.

In our conversation, he talked about the American Correctional Association and the National Institute of Corrections. The two entities are where industry standards are established; it is here where the level of care and resources that are provided inside the jails and prisons is decided.

Dr. Thomas mentioned the federal government has the money and grant programs that can help. Also, the Bureau of Justice Assistance has resources. The problem lies in that many of these grants and financial assistance programs are not well known by legislators in these states for these areas and they are not taken advantage of as much as they should be.

At the end of our conversation, Dr. Thomas left me with three things he believed would be most effective in reforming our prisons and our criminal justice system in general.

For one, sentencing needs reform. A lot of people have been sitting in prisons for years for things like marijuana possession charges due to mandatory minimums that were introduced in the 80s. According to the *United States Sentencing Commission*, 30% of cases in 2021 carried a mandatory minimum penalty; 75% were drug trafficking, 5% were child pornography, 5% were firearms, 5% were sexual abuse, and 3% were fraud. The average sentence length for those

convicted and received the mandatory minimum penalty was 139 months, or 11.5 years (USSC, 2021).

Secondly, Dr. Thomas was adamant that education be mandated for everyone inside. Whether that be school or a trade, he believes everyone should be working towards something to give them a purpose while they are incarcerated and so that their time inside is spent preparing to set them up for life when they are released.

Lastly, Dr. Thomas stressed the need for community resource connections. Even with ample preparation on the inside, being released from prison or jail is stressful and the men and women need support to get back on their feet and get back on track when they are first released. Having someone to look out for them can help make the transition smoother and hold them accountable for the change in their life they claim to want to make.

The men and women inside are smarter than what we in the public give them credit for. They understand these structures better than any student or expert because this is their lived experience every day of their incarcerated life. They have relationships with people who have successfully rehabilitated and with people who have been in and out of prison. They are the ones who have stood in front of parole boards and been denied or granted parole based on their perceived change. They know how they were mentally before they came inside and how they are mentally once inside has become their reality. They even know what is working in other parts of the world, and why the current system is not working here in the United States. They know the facts and statistics of it all. It is time to listen to these men and women when they speak on what they need because by doing so we can begin to funnel the right resources to the right places that will begin to restructure the system in a way that makes it work for its intended purpose.

Chapter 3

Prison Structure Research

In 2023, I think many people can agree there is a problem with our corrections system, no matter where you fall politically, ideologically, or socially. Since the time I was in high school, I can remember when terms like prison reform and mass incarceration became a large part of our public discourse, which means we are all talking about it and seeing and hearing it somewhere whether we want to or not.

I believe the basic tenets of what is causing the system to be flawed exist in three terms previously mentioned: mass incarceration, recidivism rates, and mental health. These terms are also all connected and explain why the system in place is not working.

Mass incarceration is the large-scale criminalization of our communities by locking them away in cells or constantly monitoring them while on parole. This is a simple definition for a complex problem that I do not believe can be encompassed in one sentence.

While it largely affects marginalized communities, meaning poor people and people of color, I am refraining from arguing a different point in terms of what is pertinent to this project; that being said, race and economic status are a large reason progress moves very slow if at all in reforming US prisons. If too many wealthy and influential white people were being locked up, this problem would not exist today.

Regarding race and economic status though, it is important to understand that mass incarceration is rooted in the oppression of these marginalized groups. The documentary *13th* by Ava Duvernay does an excellent job in depicting the roots of mass incarceration in this country.

Mass incarceration is rooted in free labor. In the 13th amendment there is a caveat that has made slavery legal in this country since owning another human being was outlawed. Manual labor was deemed legal if someone was found to have committed a crime.



Figure 4. 13th Amendment

Source: Stewart (2015)

Since a whole economic system had thrived off the backs of free slave labor for over 200 years, there was still a need for people to work. As a result, the standard for what was deemed a crime, when it came to certain communities, was low and you could be arrested and given time for something like not being at work in the middle of the day.

This criminalization evolved over the years from loitering and unemployment to things deemed today as a health crisis in drug addictions. Especially in communities of color, people were arrested and given lengthy sentences for drug possession and distribution. Today, about 65% of the US prison population has an active substance abuse disorder (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2020). While drug problems are a public health crisis, the United States has criminalized it and filled jails up with people who need medical assistance.

Inside the jail walls, the incarcerated men and women are broken down until they are shells of their former selves.

At CCCF for example, there are no windows where the men and women are held all day. One member of the class I was in commented that after a while, he started to lose the concept of what reality and the outside world was because all he knew every day was what was inside those walls.

Jails and prisons have extreme adverse effects on the mental health of everyone involved and drive people to the very edge. Most people inside are trying to survive instead of trying to live. These conditions are made worse by the policies and rules that exist inside these places.

Vox contributor German Lopez noted that a study found incarcerated men and women who receive frequent visits from family members are less likely to reoffend once they are released. However, the criminal justice think tank Prison Policy Initiative found data that says only 31% of men and women in state facilities are receiving these visits (Lopez, 2015).

The hoops that exist when it comes to visitation are what deters most family members from visiting their loved ones. For some people, the location is too far away, and they cannot afford to spend hours in the car driving every week to the facility and back. For some people, they are turned off by the methods these places use to search visitors when they come into the facility; it can be traumatic to be manhandled by a stranger and sniffed up and down by barking dogs (S. Pasha, personal communication, March 30, 2022). Visitation is also deemed a privilege in many places and can be revoked from someone for bad behavior.

Going for long periods of time without communicating with your loved ones affects your morale and your attitude to the situation at hand. You begin to lose purpose if it is difficult to tangibly see and feel one of your goals and your motivation wanes more and more.

One of the more dehumanizing practices that exists inside jails and prisons, and thankfully is beginning to be talked about more, is isolation and solitary confinement. If you have seen Ava Duvernay's Netflix docuseries *When They See Us* on the [Central Park 5](#), you witnessed the torturous effects solitary confinement can have on your mental state.

Korey Wise, who was incarcerated for 14 years, spent substantial amounts of time in solitary confinement. In the documentary, they depict him as going crazy when he is in his cell talking to a cockroach. The four plus years he spent in solitary confinement in one of the most notoriously bad jails at Rikers Island, while also living with a mental disability, fried his brain chemistry just like it has so many other people.

Solitary confinement occurs in jails and prisons usually for some sort of bad behavior. The "hole", as it is referred to inside, comes with sentences that range from months to years. In solitary, you are inside your cell for 23 hours a day with one hour allotted for showering and rec time on your own. The rest of the time you spend sitting in a small box staring at the four walls.

While solitary is used to deter violence and punish bad behavior, the Prison Policy Initiative has found that this confinement "shortens lives" from "irreparable harm" that shrinks the part of the brain responsible for memory and leading to long term psychiatric syndromes. In short, solitary confinement is literally killing the people who are subject to its conditions every day.

The last point to cover on the flaw in the prison system is the effectiveness at which they work through recidivism rates in the United States. As mentioned earlier, the United States sits at a recidivism rate of almost 80%, meaning that 80% of the people that are released from prison at any given time will return at some point in their lives. The time spent in prison is not setting people up for success once they are released.

While people may think it is because these people are criminals and have no desire to reform themselves, that is not the reality. All the people I have talked to who are currently or formerly incarcerated have said that once they were inside, all they wanted to do was go home and do whatever it takes not to come back. Having your freedom taken from you is scary enough to force someone to change.

The reality is though, that when these people are released, they are so affected by the trauma they have endured while inside and they are financially unprepared from the generations of criminalization on their communities that when they hit the streets for the first time, all they learned how to do while inside was survive. Many people are released with no job and money (with companies being unwilling to hire a formerly incarcerated person on top of that), mental health problems that remain unaddressed and worsened, and in some instances no place to go. As a result, with no direction or resources to keep them on the straight path, many people reoffend or violate the terms of their probation and are arrested again and given a longer sentence than before.

With the flaws that exist in the US system, we should be looking to solve them with new solutions that are innovative and human friendly. From what you have read so far, my hope is that you can see prison and jails are ineffective in the United States because they treat the crime instead of the person. However, there are other places in the world that employ person-first rehabilitation and have witnessed extremely successful results.

Two hours south of Oslo (the capital of Norway) and next to the Sweden border is Halden Fengsel or Halden Prison. One of the mottos at this prison is “better out than in” as Norway as a country does not give out the death penalty, life sentences, and in most cases the most you can get in a sentence is 21 years, although if you are deemed unfit to return to society,

they may add on another five years at the end of your sentence until you are ready (Benko, 2015).

While there are structural differences between the United States and Norway, such as their economic system that allows the government to provide health care, education, and pensions to all its citizens, there are practices that take place at Halden that can be replicated elsewhere.

Halden Prison operates on the basis that the punishment each person is paying for their crime is losing their freedom. They are separated from their family, loved ones, and daily lives by a wall that does not allow them to go back out until they are ready.

Norway's prison system looked like the United States' up until 1998 when their Ministry of Justice reexamined their correctional practices and created a focus on rehabilitating prisoners and then another focus on reintegrating them into society in 2007 by finding residence and reliable income before they are ever released (Benko, 2015).

The human first practices that are employed at Halden start with human interaction. They believe the best way to promote good behavior inside the prison is to trust the incarcerated population inside. While that might seem paradoxical because they have just committed a crime, it is a part of their process of personalizing the relationships of everyone involved. The prison was designed with cramped office space for guards so that they would be encouraged to go and interact with the people inside. They also use dynamic security; whereas static security is used in the United States to move prisoners under the watch of guards in handcuffs as well as 24/7 surveillance at all times, Halden uses dynamic security where the incarcerated group is allowed to roam freely during the day and there are fewer intrusive cameras always watching them. The guards build relationships with the incarcerated group and in turn build trust between the two

groups, limiting the bad intentions people are fearful of incarcerated people having when inside. To add onto that, Halden Prison cited that in its first five years of being open, the isolation cell with a limb restraining bed they had in place had not been used once.

Of the 251 people at Halden, nearly half of them are there for violent crime (murder, assault, or rape). This group of people are held in what they call Unit A; while it is more restrictive in terms of how much freedom they have to socialize with others during the day, their main distinction is that they are receiving close psychiatric and or medical supervision, not solitary confinement. Even they can gather sparingly to socialize with each other and the guards and have time for relaxation and enjoyment.

Norway's focus is so high on identifying the problem and figuring out the solution that a man being held at Halden who was involved in one of the most high-profile murder cases in the country has been the subject of discussion by doctors and officials on whether he should be in a prison or a psychiatric hospital.

Halden Prison is constructed to give you the skills necessary to be successful when you are eventually released, such as providing culinary skills to many of the men inside. At the same time, they are addressing whatever mental trauma you are suffering from or whatever addiction has had a negative impact on your life. For example, one unit is specifically set up for addiction recovery where they are given treatment to recover from their addictions in the hopes that they do not have that same craving once they return to the outside.

Among all the big things like programs and relationships with the guards at Halden are several little things that make the world of difference in people's lives. Instead of sitting in artificially lit rooms or dark rooms all day, they are allowed to still experience sunlight and nature, something that allows them to keep that sense of reality. In Halden, they do not eat cheap

and unhealthy food high in sodium and cholesterol; they have grocery stores where the people inside can buy fresh produce to cook their own meals with. While they do not live in luxurious rooms, they are afforded dorm style rooms and furniture, a far cry from the metal bunk beds in cells across the United States.

Halden is not perfect, and the people in charge of the prison admit that. While Norway's recidivism and incarceration rates are significantly lower than the United States, one of the wardens at Halden Prison concedes that the correlation of their methods does not necessarily mean causation. There is no evidence that their methods are reducing crime or causing people to return less. However, he does say their frame of mind is different in that you should not want to treat the incarcerated population humanely because it does them a favor, but rather it is a reflection on yourself and everyone/everything you represent every day you come to work.

Halden's biggest concern is that at some point these incarcerated men and women will become your neighbors again. Instead of punishing them beyond removing them from society, they choose to do as much as they can to make them a non-threat the next time you walk down the street by them. That mindset is what makes the people involved in the whole operation effective in doing their job; their work does not only affect the hours they are at work, but it has a longer lasting impact on themselves and their families down the line.

The work at Halden and Norway in general has not gone unnoticed in the United States and other parts of the world though. Other countries in Europe have adopted similar models over the years and experienced similar results.

While these other European nations have experienced similar statistics of incarceration (in relation to their population) like overcrowding and a large mentally ill population, they have

started to experience lower numbers in incarceration and recidivism (numbers that were comparable to those of the United States before reform took place).

From studying the model in Norway, countries such as Germany and Finland began to emphasize the human dignity approach when it came to their procedures around their incarcerated population (Subramanian, 2021). Officials admitted, just like in Norway, that it is difficult to say that the treatment of the incarcerated men and women is what causes these results, but they are confident that the two are related.

In interviews with men from different facilities across Europe, journalist Ram Subramanian found that the attitudes were generally more positive than that of people incarcerated in the United States with some of the men using words like “hopeful” to describe the outlook on their situation. Subramanian also characterized the energy of the different facilities he visited as “calm and quiet” with “high degrees of trust between staff and the incarcerated population (Subramanian, 2021).

Here in the United States, certain facilities in Connecticut and Oregon as well as the entire state of North Dakota have experienced positive results from implementing strategies learned from the Norwegian model at Halden.

At Cheshire Correctional Institution in Connecticut, they have used what they call the TRUE program, based on findings Connecticut corrections commissioner Scott Semple learned about while he was shadowing a facility in Germany (Chammah, 2018). In this program, the older men inside the facility are paired with younger guys. They are trusted to mentor the younger men and assist them with their schedules full of classes and work. They are also all brought together to speak vulnerably about their respective situations. In these conversations, Semple said they try to find balance of recognizing the trauma that exists in the neighborhoods

they all come from (generally low-income in this community) and how that negatively influenced them while also speaking honestly about personal responsibility and their individual duty to do better than their surroundings.

The men in the TRUE program at Cheshire talk about the emphasis on their emotional growth and development to improve decision making. They admit that many of their fundamental needs in life have not been met and that has led to anger and sadness; they are learning to channel that energy into wanting to do better for themselves.

The Oregon State Penitentiary has their Amend program where they house 40 seriously mentally ill people with violent behavior records during their incarceration (Bouffard, 2019). From their time studying the Halden Prison in Norway, they developed a resource team that provides programming for 10 hours a day along with 10 more hours during the day the unit are allowed unstructured recreational time. For the first time in years, some of the men in the program were allowed outside of their cells while in programming; the guards at the penitentiary described it as “the most rewarding experience of their careers”.

North Dakota has had the most buy in to the Norwegian model that has led to wholesale changes across the whole state. Across the state, legislation has been passed to reform sentencing; Republican governor passed Senate Bill 2015 and House Bill 1041 in 2017. The former mandated all correctional facilities to create a prison population plan and required counties to offer alternatives to physical custody such as drug treatment programs. The latter expanded sentence reduction, reduced mandatory minimums, and established presumptive probation guidelines for Class C felonies such as drug possession. A year later, a state report found North Dakota’s incarcerated population had dropped 6.5% (Janzer, 2019).

At Missouri River Correctional Facility in Bismarck, North Dakota, they have changed the name of their solitary confinement unit from the Segregation Unit to the Behavior Intervention Unit, or BIU. In BIU, you must complete four hours of programming a day whether that is a treatment program or academic classes aimed at a GED. The men are given a report card and an improvement plan that must be met to be released from the unit. Officials have found that most men only need the program for a few months, and only 21% of the incarcerated population there commits an offense that puts them back into the program once they complete it a first time.

North Dakota has gone a step further and addressed the fact that in prisons and jails across the United States, women receive less programming than their male counterparts. To combat this, North Dakota correctional officials have moved women from a nearby jail to Missouri River Correctional Facility where there are plenty of resources and made space for them by transferring patients who do not need confinement but do need medical attention to a treatment hospital nearby.

More recently, the infamous San Quentin prison located in San Francisco has recently announced under Gavin Newsome that they would be shifting to the Norwegian model. The plan is for the new prison to act as a beacon of prison reform in California and transform into a final stop of incarceration before people are released.

Inside, there is a plan to focus on job training for trades such as plumbers, electricians, and truck drivers (Levin, 2023). The juxtaposition of San Quentin in the San Francisco Bay is also meant to represent that the incarcerated people inside not only will be back in the daily bustle of San Francisco, but will now have a real chance at integrating themselves into the lifestyle undertaken by its inhabitants (Chabria, 2023).

All these places do not have a perfect formula to make the prison system better here in the United States. The most important thing though is that they have all attempted to design their corrections on the needs of the person instead of punishing the crime.

With a mindset shift of how we view those who commit crimes in the United States, there is precedent that we can begin to solve some of the issues that exist and remedy our society by fixing theirs on the inside.

Chapter 4

Counter Arguments

Many people would say these changes are idealistic and would take too massive of an overhaul to be realistic. To transform our criminal justice system and our prison systems specifically, it would take a large culture shift and a change in our frame of reference as a society.

While many other parts of the world collective as a society where the greater whole is more important than the individual, the United States is an individualistic society where the most important person is self. As a result, those who are not affected by these issues do not even have to think about it.

For those who are blessed enough not to have to worry about our worrying incarceration statistics and conditions, they have a narrow view of what it means to be incarcerated in this country. When prompted about prison reform, a common response for this group of people is that incarcerated men and women owe a debt to society, and they should be punished for it. They believe prisons are not a place meant to respect those that come in when they could not respect others while they had their freedom.

It is an understandable take on what it should mean to be incarcerated; why should we do favors for a group of people who hurt others? How would they learn their lesson if prison is treated like a self-care retreat?

There is also not a consensus agreement that the strategies being employed in Norway are as smooth and straight forward as they are made out to be. While Halden Prison has the reputation as the “most humane prison in the world”, not everyone incarcerated there agrees wholeheartedly with that statement.

In a study done by Sami Abdel-Salam and Ashley Kilmer, the researchers conducted a survey of the men at Halden prison. They asked them about their confinement and what effect the physical and structural design of the prison had on their respective outlooks.

While many were grateful for certain amenities they were provided such as the private living quarters that serve as their cell, they still lamented the fact that prison is prison (Abdel-Salam & Kilmer, 2022). The nature around them is nice and makes incarceration more bearable, but the wall around them is a constant reminder they do not have their freedom and that many of their decisions, whether it is programming or when they can socialize, are still made for them; the autonomy might be greater, but it is still controlled.

Lastly, there is the social and economic aspect of it all, which may be the most important to lawmakers and those who have power to force change.

It is no secret the United States, in terms of population is much larger than all the European nations. Inevitably, the prison population is significantly higher here, meaning the probability of recidivism being higher here too. Norway’s Halden Prison is the second largest prison in Norway and only holds 250 residents. In comparison, the second largest jail/prison in the United States is at Rikers Island in New York with a population of 13,849 (Carlin, 2023).

With a larger population means the costs for caring for everyone incarcerated is higher. We have already seen that an average of \$80 a day is spent on a single incarcerated person every

day and around \$68 billion is spent on correctional operations in total every year. It would be even more costly to add the proper programming at every facility across the country.

Chapter 5

Response

While it will be pricey to put extra money on the table for more programs, the potential return on investment is so great that it is certainly worth it. From Washington State's prison system, a 2012 report found that while their Residential Drug Abuse Treatment Program costs on average \$3,100 a year per inmate, it yields a savings return of \$5,230 per inmate through lower costs for arrests, convictions, incarceration, and supervision. While investing in treatment for the incarcerated population may come at a hefty cost, there is a chance it ends up saving significantly more money on the back end.

Money aside, the best reason I have found for why people should care is because of human dignity. As little kids we are taught two wrongs do not make a right. There should be a punishment for someone who commits a crime. The punishment is having your freedom taken away from you. Once that is taken from you though, people do not deserve to be punished more. You can teach incarcerated people a lesson without dehumanizing them.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

Part of that humanization will come from our public discourse around people who commit crimes. You may have noticed not once in this project have I referred to this group as criminals, inmates, or felons. Instead, I have used language that describes their condition but does not characterize them as a person. Person-first language is a small step people can take to begin to change our society's outlook on incarcerated people.

Incarcerated people are not animals. From my experience around them over the last two years, I have learned they are some of the smartest and down-to-earth people you will meet; the perceptions around them are certainly false.

A professor I had here in my time at Penn State asked our class on the first day how would you feel if everyone characterized you by the worst mistake you ever made or the time you really hurt someone? We all make mistakes; some are more costly than others. We also all deserve a second chance.

In this project, my hope is that you have seen that our incarcerated population is being ignored and not having their needs met. This is leading to unbreakable cycles of incarceration where serious problems are being unaddressed.

By changing our prison model to be rehabilitative instead of punitive, we will begin to address crime in this country. Once people come in, they will get the help they need in whatever capacity with the hope that they never come back. This requires a total buy in from everyone

when it comes to our view of crime. If we are going to claim to be one nation under God, it is time to start being as merciful as the Christian god is said to be.

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Penn State University,
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Member of the Schreyer's Honor College
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Relevant Coursework

- Principles of Journalism
- News Media Ethics
- News Writing and Reporting
- Radio Reporting
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Michael Gaines

Penn State University, Broadcast Journalism

I am a former student-athlete with aspirations of coaching professional soccer or working in the soccer media.

Job Experience

○ SPRING 2023 - Present

Per 90 Sporting Advisory **Intern**

Using HUDL Sportscode to clip film from European soccer games to sell for instruction

○ SUMMER 2022 - Present

312 Podcast **Founder**

Co-host, producer, and co-editor of soccer specific podcast broadcast on Youtube and Spotify

○ SUMMER 2021-SUMMER 2022

PG Young Boys U23 **Head Coach**

Head coach of local NCAA and MLS academy players participating in summer matches

○ JAN 2021-JUN 2021

4th and Just Us **Intern**

Research intern; providing show hosts with notes on different topics weekly; sat in on weekly production meetings

○ SEP 2021-DEC 2021

Sperry **Campus Ambassador**

Creating marketing events on campus and distributing product

○ JUN 2016-JUN 2018

Brown Gaines LLC **Office Assistant**

Assisted upper-level professionals in company with general office task

Campus Involvement

○ Fall 2022 - Present

CLTR CNTRL

A sports segment host for a broadcast on YouTube

○ FALL 2021 - Present

Student Athlete Advisory Board

A representative for men's soccer team; Head of Communications team in charge of social media and monthly newsletter

○ SUMMER 2019 - FALL 2022

Penn State Men's Soccer

Play as a Defender (#14)

Leadership, communication, teamwork, and time-management skills all applicable

○ SPRING 2020 - Present

Penn State Black Student Athletes

Founding Member; Secretary July 2020-July 2021; Vice President July 2021-Present; Organizing Community events.

Community Outreach

○ 2015 - Present

Father Horace Mckenna Center

Volunteered serving meals to homeless men in the homeless shelter below the church of my alma mater high school