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Alternatives to Incarceration

Today there are approximately 2.2 million prisoners in the United States. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, there has been a 500% increase in the prison population over the past 40 years. This overall increase is not a result of growth in crime rates, but a change in policy and law structure. Unfortunately, this substantial population development in American prisons compromises privacy, safety, security, and mental health. We must reflect on the issue of overcrowding within American prisons and ask, is total incarceration working towards a better society, or limiting the justice served?

The truth is, every system must undergo some amending to prosper in an ever-changing society. Today, if I could make one change to the criminal justice system, I would surely enforce investment in alternatives to incarceration, especially in regards to drug charges. Unfortunately, some of the very laws created to serve justice have grown to fail justice. For example, mandatory minimum sentencing. When a person is convicted of a specific crime, it is said that they will receive a minimum punishment, regardless of unique circumstances.

According to The Federal Bureau of Prisons, 46.4% of inmates are incarcerated due to a drug offense. Most of the time, prisons or jails are not among the best options for someone who is battling the life of addiction that results in drug-related criminal offenses. Alternatives to prison include treatment programs, rehabilitation programs, or even drug courts. The National Institute of Justice explains that drug courts lower recidivism rates and save public funds that would otherwise be placed towards an individual's re-arrest.

It only makes sense that rehabilitation would be a better option. There are countless stories of individuals who turn to drugs because of depression, anxiety, or deep-rooted trauma. They then sell these drugs to profit from their own addiction. Drug offenders can recover and even prosper after rehabilitation. Oftentimes, the only people that they ever hurt were themselves.

The National Institute on Drug Abuse explains that in America alone, half of the individuals who experience a mental health disorder will also develop a substance use disorder. This means that the same people who are put in prison for their drug offenses are extremely likely to have a mental illness. This can lead one to wonder, will prison truly solve such a deep-rooted problem? Would it not be more beneficial to send these individuals to a rehabilitation program? Everyone deserves a fair chance at life. People with mental health issues who resort to drug use should not be dehumanized, rather restored to a sense of health and normality.

An article written by authors at the Justice Policy Institute highlights 4 findings in regards to choosing rehabilitation over imprisonment. The first finding explains that treatment can be less expensive than a term of imprisonment. Studies show that treatment including residency could potentially only cost half of the price of a term while incarcerated. The second shows that treatment can be cost-effective. The research found that a dollar spent on drug treatment saves society seven and a half dollars in reduced crime and regained productivity. The next finding highlights that treatment can reduce substance abuse while building communities. Program alternatives would allow people to face addiction and learn to become a productive part of their family and community. The last and possibly most important finding is evidence of programs across America that have been effective. Maryland in specific has tried these programs, resulting in lowering recidivism rates and saving lives.

Overall, decreasing the population of incarcerated individuals in the United States would increase the safety of both the public and individuals working for the criminal justice system. According to the National Institute for Jail Operations, in Tennessee, nearly half of the State's Jails have more inmates than beds. Some of these jails are holding two to three times as many inmates as they are certified for. This number is alarming for not only the well-being of the inmates but also for the security of the officers employed in these jails. An increase in inmates does not typically increase deputies. This means that officers are put in an uncomfortable position in which the inmate to officer ratio becomes dangerous.

I took it upon myself to interview a local corrections officer. They stated that the county jail in which they are employed often exceeds inmate capacity. When there are more inmates than beds, the jail makes the executive decision to put cots in the common areas. This statement was extremely alarming to me. The safety of both inmates and officers is compromised, providing evidence that overpopulation is an issue that must be addressed.

Both my family and I have watched loved one's battle addiction. They do not get a second chance in society, rather they are shunned and locked away. I also have family members serving in the criminal justice community. This perspective ultimately allows me to develop an opinion on this much-needed change in our criminal justice system. The truth is, this change seems minor, but it is necessary for the bettering of our society. With compliance and policy changes, we could make the world a better place, one alternative at a time.

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