Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology

Volume 8 | Issue 5 Article 9

1918

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Recommended Citation

F. Emory Lyon, Housing of Prisoners, 8 J. Am. Inst. Crim. L. & Criminology 739 (May 1917 to March 1918)

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THE HOUSING OF PRISONERS

F. EMORY LYON[1]

In considering the subject of prison building, I wish to approach the matter neither from the standpoint of the average prison keeper, to whom custodial security is apt to be the end and aim of a jail, nor from that of the architect, usually bent upon technical reversion to type and the injection of artificial elements for a presumably abnormal population and method of living. Let us consider the theme rather from the social point of view; the factors essential in fitting men for freedom; and also from the viewpoint of the occupants of prisons, so far as we may be able to interpret their feelings and desires.

The student of this subject is confronted first of all with the paucity of material to be found in books, printed reports or authoritative standards for guidance. There is very little literature in this field, especially in English, and what there is seems to be of almost ancient vintage. Our information must come, therefore, from fragments of reference to the matter incidental to the treatment of penal progress and administration, and from the still more general results of wide observation and experience.

As a matter of fact it is both suprising and discouraging to find that so little originality, inventiveness and human ingenuity has been displayed in this important field. As a result, history has repeated itself again and again in a return to the ideas and forms of prison construction which a previous generation had discarded. Perhaps the reason for this may be that man was never intended to be a caged animal. If so, it could hardly be expected or desired that an unnatural, unscientific thing should become a permanent and standardized reality. At any rate a satisfactory method of imprisonment has never been reached, even though, thus far, it has seemed to be necessary.

That society is beginning to see the possibilities of a better way of dealing with delinquents through probation and parole supervision is quite certain. The same principle of individual rather than congregate treatment has gained considerable foothold in the extension of the honor system, farm and road work, the penal farm and dormitory system, etc. Whether these methods, now in their experimental stage, will one day entirely displace stone walls and iron bars is a question for the future. Thus far, less than ten per cent of the prison population of the United States is serving sentence under the open sky, and a greater extension of the system seems to result in a geometrically increasing number of escapes.

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Whether it is because we have taught men to depend upon the old method, therefore, or whether we lack sufficient faith in the new, prison buildings appear to be essential for the protection of society as well as to save men from their own weaknesses. Whether such structures should be strictures upon men's natural methods of association and communication; whether they should save space and expense or save men; how far classification of quality without caste distinction may be affected, are problems for the state, the architect and the administrator to determine.

It is hardly necessary to state that nearly all prison buildings of the past have been wholly lacking in those elements of construction that permit of adequate light and air, proper classification of inmates, and opportunity for the improvement of the occupants.

Thus far only three general types of prison construction have apparently ever been conceived by the human mind. All of these types are now in use, and in each case, they are the survival or imitation of similar institutions proposd or produced in previous centuries. Thus, the prevailing plan, followed in the building of county jails, work-houses, and nearly all state penal institutions, of a central cell-block, with two rows of cells, facing an outer wall, with a corridor between, has persisted ever since the abandonment of the underground prison in the latter part of the sixteenth century and the early part of the seventeenth.

The advantages of this method of housing prisoners have been as follows: Compactness, providing for a large population in small space; convenience of arrangement for service pipes and forced ventilation between rows of cells; considerable degree of privacy for the inmate, since each cell looks out upon a blank wall rather than into another cell.

The plan has not afforded adequate ventilation, since no direct light and air can penetrate the cell. Supervision can be exercised only periodically rather than constantly. This form of prison is suited only to the congregate method of dealing with prisoners, rather than the more desirable individualization of treatment. It would be easy to cite "horrible examples" of this form of prison, as the dark unwholesome ones are greatly in the majority and have done untold injury to the health, morals and manhood of countless victims. I prefer to point to three of the best examples of this form of prison construction; namely, the city prison at Memphis, Tennessee, the County Jail of Marion, Indiana, and the State Prison at Stillwater, Minnesota.

A variation from this uniform type of cell-block, having individual cells with bars and a door inclosing the inmate, is found in the Military Prison at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. In one cell-block in that institution, built of concrete, there are the same partitions for individual cells, but each is open across the front, so that the men are upon their honor and at liberty within the limits of certain rules, while bathing and lavatory facilities are at the end of the cell-block. Another building with the same interior open cells has partitions at intervals of twenty or thirty feet, each space containing cots for six or eight men.

A second form of prison building, of more recent development, but no less ancient origin, is that with a central corridor with cells on either side, and with the windows of each cell opening directly to the outer air. The first structure of this type is found to be a part of the Hospital of St. Michael, founded at Rome in 1704, by no less a personage than Pope Clement XI. The hospital was for both dependent and delinquent boys. The latter class, composing one-fifth of the population, were housed in outer cells as described, built in tiers, one above another, as in the case of the central cell-block. The Eastern Pennsylvania Prison at Philadelphia, one of the earliest American prisons, still in use, is built on this plan, though a one-story structure, and with large cells or rooms, but a narrow corridor between.

No other examples are found in recent years, except in the old county jail at Buffalo, and one at Mansfield, Ohio. A model cell-block of this kind may be seen at the Chicago House of Correction; the new county jail at Buffalo, and a cell-block at the Michigan State Prison at Jackson, with large dormitories, each containing ten or twelve inmates, instead of single cells.

The same principle of outer cells is observed in the plans for the new prison now being erected at Joliet, Illinois, though with a unique variation. Here we find eight circular cell-block units, surrounding a central dining hall. Although this form of building has not previously been erected, a similar plan was proposed by Jeremy Bentham in a book written about 1778.

The advantages of the interior corridor and outer windows are found in the better opportunity for sky-lights and direct light to the cells. Whether better ventilation is secured depends, of course, upon whether the inmates are required to open the windows, and upon their being opened freely while cells are unoccupied.

European delegates to the International Prison Congress in 1910, objected to the inside corridor because it facilitated communication between prisoners. This criticism was based, however, upon the supposition that solitary confinement, as followed in Europe, is the most desirable method of imprisonment.

The third general type adopted for the housing of prisoners is found in the Dormitory and Cottage Plan. The Cottage System was first used for juvenile offenders in Hamburg as early as 1833, while a similar school was established at Hart's Island, New York, in 1867. Many similar institutions have since been developed in the various states, including our own St. Charles School for boys. This form of housing has been widely used in Europe in the famous farm colonies in Switzerland, Denmark, Holland, Germany and elsewhere, but only for petty offenders rather than felons.

The dormitory form of housing has more generally and more recently been developed in this country. The well-known dormitory colony of the District of Columbia at Occoquan, Va., was among the first, but has been followed by similar institutions at Guelph, Ont., Greencastle, Indiana, and elsewhere. Stone walls and iron bars are entirely eliminated from these institutions as in the case of the cottage plan. Modifications of this "wide open" method of housing may be cited at Comstock, New York, where the prison wall is dispensed with, but the inmates are confined in cells at night; and in various prisons of the Central West, where the interior cell-block has been torn out, and rows of cots are placed within the outer wall, with no separation of the several occupants.

This method of congregate housing is admittedly an experiment and officials differ widely as to whether it will ultimately prove helpful or harmful to prison inmates.

I have thus attempted to describe briefly the limited forms of housing thus developed for prisoners. It is not to be presumed that any of these forms are final, and new ideas are apparently badly needed in this field. Unless and until we are able to dispense with prison buildings altogether, it seems to be certain there is vast room for improvement upon all ideas heretofore advanced and formulated in stone, concrete and steel. It is easy to see that the trend has been toward the development of provision for smaller units, and better classification of prisoners. Just how this may be further accomplished both in our present structures, and in the discovery of a better system, let us now consider.

There are several things in this connection which may be taken for granted. That prison buildings should be substantial, provide for ample light and fresh air, and furnish all the facilities for personal cleanliness, can be assumed. It is neither good economics nor good public policy to house prisoners in such a way as to destroy their self-respect or their physical vigor.

The fact that many prison inmates have previously lived in filth by choice or neglect is no reason why the state should force them so to do. On the contrary it cannot afford to permit them to do so, and their incarceration affords the best opportunity to teach them better habits.

But physical comforts should not be the chief consideration in the housing of prisoners. Heretofore these have been the chief factors to be given attention in assembling groups of men, whether in prisons or in armies.

But the psychology of the situation, it seems to me, is of vastly more importance. No estimate has ever been made as to the effect of solitary confinement, or even of forced custody, upon the mental machinery and attitude of the victim. Possibly the nature of the case is such that no such measurement could be taken. Stories have come down to us of men going insane by reason of being under the constant scrutiny of an eye. A recent writer has expressed his belief that no man could ever be the same again after spending a single night behind iron bars. While this may be an extreme view, we may well presume that no one could languish for twenty-four hours in the fetid, unwholesome atmosphere of most police stations and many county jails without the awakening of rebellion against society, even if not the arousing of latent criminal impulses.

On the other hand, in speaking of the use of open dormitories I have stated that observers are uncertain as to the ultimate effect upon the minds of men. Apparently the complete lack of privacy and opportunity for the relaxation, which privacy alone affords, makes this experiment a debatable one at best.

Just at this time our own State of Illinois has an exceptional opportunity to work out the best methods known and to originate still better plans. The state commission for building the new Joliet prison has already begun operations, but fortunately the plan adopted lends itself to variation from the contemplated provisions. As previously stated, the plans provide for eight separate cell-block units. While these are to be of modern construction with ample light and provision for ventilation, yet all are to be cell-blocks, nevertheless.

While prisoners may be classified in the different units, yet the plan affords no chance for those inmates who do not need to be housed in cells at all.

It would seem there is no good reason why several of the units should not take a different form. For instance, two cell-blocks accommodating two hundred fifty each, would, doubtless, provide for all for whom separate cells seem to be required. Two others might be of the open dormitory type, until such time as they shall prove to be inadvisable. With the demonstrated possibilities of trustworthy prisoners, two may well be built very much like any college dormitory, with separate private rooms. The remaining units, as needed, could be of the cottage variety, found in the modern industrial school.

This proposal would accommodate itself to the original plan, while giving opportunity for a more marked and intensive classification of the prisoners, and a greater variety of treatment. May we not hope that the new State Department of Public Welfare, with its more centralized control of correctional institutions, shall make possible the best-known methods of housing the prisoners of Illinois.

Better still, may it discover a way, with the prospect under Penal Farm Colonies, and otherwise, to care for its derelicts under the open sky, and that soon stone walls, coops, cages, shackels, and iron bars shall be obsolete for human beings.

For may we not say, in general and in conclusion, that more and more people believe that prisons should be hospitals for sick souls, and correctional colleges for the education of undeveloped minds, rather than soulless dungeons for human bodies, or schools of crime, where "evil communications corrupt good manners."

Perhaps the golden rule test prescribed by a certain Quaker woman is, after all, the best standard for our ideals in the future. This good woman, in the course of a report on French prisons, uttered this sage maxim to the King and Queen: "When thee builds a prison, thee had better build with the thought ever in thy mind, that thee or thy children may occupy the cells."