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## WHY PRISONS FAIL

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All reliable figures show that the majority of boys sentenced to State Reformatories get into further trouble upon release. Furthermore, the majority of life histories of adult prisoners in penitentiaries reveal a record of previous incarceration in some correctional school or reformatory. It is common knowledge that penal institutions are failing to provide suitable programs of character development inside their vine-clad walls. Officials in charge of these institutions should not be severely blamed for this state of affairs because most of them are well aware of these facts but do not know what to do about it. One cannot place too much blame upon politics either. The outstanding feature of the whole situation seems to be the evident fact that specific techniques and methods for changing or developing desirable human conduct are wretchedly inadequate. This lack of method is felt not only by prison administrators but by teachers and parents as well. There is urgent need for some definite program of research to determine how to develop traits of honesty, trustworthiness and fair play which might be turned into practical use in reorganizing the programs of penal institutions.

The ideal solution for many insistent problems in crime is prevention. But a program of prevention is meaningless without clear-cut, proved methods for developing desirable traits. It would be a simple matter to get rid of all criminals simply by abolishing all laws since a criminal by definition is one who violates the law. Another alternative would be to release every prisoner; dynamite every state and federal prison in the country; and insist that each local community be held responsible for the conduct of its members. This would carry us back to the pre-prison age in which disputes were settled with fists and clubs. However, the doctrine of the survival of the fittest provides no guarantee that the traits of honesty, trustworthiness and truthfulness, would triumph in the end. Interaction between individuals is essential to the formation of character. Narrow segregation warps character. Laws are designed to provide some

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semblance of order in human action and interaction. Since we have both laws and prisons which are founded upon hundreds of years of lethargic past experience probably the only alternative for the immediate present is to retain both and attempt to redefine the relationship between law, order, and punishment.

Fixed routine and army-like discipline in prison serve mainly to cultivate a bland acquiescence to the immediate situation. This seems to be an evident conclusion since such repetition is chiefly a process of habit formation devoid of any ethical purpose except possibly a blind obedience upon a low intellectual level.

Such training in prison usually has very little value in actual life situations since there are relatively few similar elements found in both the prison and in the home. This is the *first reason* why prisons fail to reform. Obedience to prison rules does not carry over to obedience of the law outside of prison. The uniformity in dress and routine found in prison is not found in the home. The regularity of meals in prison conforms in a certain measure to the regularity of meals in the home but the satisfaction derived from regularity of food-taking plays little part in the formation of such character patterns as honesty, truthfulness, and fair-dealing.

Prison programs breed indifference. They should be designed to afford more contrasts between satisfaction and disgust. Prisons "fail to cultivate regret" as Doistoievsky shrewdly observed. Character is developed through contrasts. Success and failure are two great teachers. In prison conduct is governed mainly by the clock and whistle. In one institution tobacco is distributed on Wednesday morning. Meals are served at seven, eleven, and four o'clock. Each afternoon the prisoners are locked in their cells at five. Lights are out at nine. All clothing is of the same color and design. Prisoners march in line to and from work. Meals are eaten in silence. Such routine may be considered by some as necessary for handling thousands of men but where are the contrasts which are essential to normal life?

Certain so-called reforms have been recently instituted in Illinois and other states, namely, the abolishment of the close-clipped head; the establishment of commissaries; the introduction of motion pictures, radios, et cetera. These changes alone have very little value as builders of character. However, they are a part of a larger plan which might be developed into an effective program of reform in the future. For example, if in addition to the above so-called "reforms" prisoners were paid for their work (according to a piece work sys-

tem or wages of a few cents per hour); and then were allowed to start small savings accounts in the institution business office in a manner akin to normal human business practice; one might anticipate that certain habits of stability and integrity would be formed which might continue to function upon release. Such procedure finds support in a well-founded psychological law pertaining to the transfer of training, namely, that training in one situation carries over to another situation whenever both have similar or identical elements in common. Prisoners usually lack business sense. In the main they have had very meagre training in legitimate business transactions. Although many prisons in America provide wages for inmates certain restrictions and limitations frequently rob the transaction of its intended practical value.

Prisons merely soothe the "conscience" of the prisoner. Prisons may teach a thief a trade but that is no guarantee that the thief will thereafter be honest in his dealings with other individuals outside of prison. In fact, Glueck's studies show that boys released from the reformatory seldom follow the trade learned in the reformatory. Forced honesty through strict prison discipline usually does not carry over to spontaneous honesty outside of prison. Honesty must spring from a series of situations in which genuine satisfactions result from being honest.

The *second reason* why prisons fail is because the so-called punishment (if one insists upon calling it punishment) does not follow immediately upon the commission of the criminal act. The prison loses its power as a deterrent because several weeks (or even years) elapse between the commission of the act and the sentence to prison. This fact has been repeatedly stressed in the American press. In the interim many subtle stimuli enter into the whole situation the chief of which is resentment against society and all law.

In minor delinquencies judges frequently recommend that the family should move to a new neighborhood in which the delinquency rate is low. This is often highly beneficial, as is shown in Clifford Shaw's book *The Jack Roller* in which a delinquent succeeds admirably when placed in a new cultural environment. The medical profession long ago discovered that a "change in climate" was beneficial to neurasthenic and hysterical individuals. The efficacy of such treatment, of course, depends upon whether or not the climate is better than, or distinctly different from, that customarily experienced.

Prisons are designedly quite different from the better class of American homes. The restriction in freedom is the first outstanding

difference. In one respect many prisoners are perfectly "at home" in prison because they are thrown into intimate contact with other delinquent individuals just as they were on the outside. Prison environment is abnormal environment. The "change in climate" proves deleterious rather than beneficial. This *third reason* for the failure of our prison system seems very evident. Many prisoners who enter prisons have never experienced the luxury of two shower baths each week and a bountiful supply of clean linen. However, it should be observed that one cannot alter the deep-seated habits of a forger or burglar by scrubbing the outside of his body. One might anticipate better success in deterring a young lad from "stick-ups" by administering an over-dose of castor oil. The feeling of well-being engendered by rosy health provides fertile ground for the cultivation of desirable traits of character. Unfortunately life in prison today fails to capitalize the abundant energy generated by forced leisure. A healthy body alone does not guarantee a truly ethical type of mental activity although it is highly desirable and is of great importance in any well-rounded program for individual development.

About ten per cent of prisoners are adversely affected when thrown into the rigid routine and tiny cells of the penitentiary. Such a radical "change in climate" upsets them. These individuals need psychiatric treatment lest they become demented. Fortunately, several of the prisons in America now have psychiatric units to care for this group. Such unstable individuals are usually disciplinary problems which interfere with the maintenance of order inside of a prison.

This group in particular, and all prisoners to a lesser degree, are lacking in what Alfred Adler calls "Gemeinschaftsgefühl" or social feeling. The French refer to this spirit of common devotion as "esprit de corps." Prisons are failing (*fourth reason*) in respect to the development of this essential prerequisite to normal social adjustment. Social feeling is injured whenever normal social intercourse is denied. The bland, hard, indifferent prison atmosphere which is devoid of pleasant and satisfying interaction between individuals certainly cannot be expected to produce exemplary models of normal conduct. Normal conduct does not necessarily imply perfect conduct. A variety of social stimuli are needed to train an individual in correct habits of response to the myriads of various social situations which each individual confronts today.

In this connection a *fifth reason* comes to mind to help explain the failure of our prisons. Culture is neglected. Beauty is absent. Hon. Sanford Bates, Director of Federal Prisons, has stressed the

constructive value of beauty in prison architecture. Professors Hartshorne and May of Yale University recently discovered that children who come from the better class of homes, in which music and art find a place, cheat less on examinations which are designed to test deceit. Such studies afford excellent proof of the value of esthetic or cultural surroundings in creating a wholesome respect for order in life.

Probably the best way to make a dishonest man honest is to provide situations in which honesty brings emotional satisfaction. This thought leads to the *sixth reason* why prisons fail to reform, namely, because they operate to create a colorless indifference rather than to stimulate deeper emotional satisfactions. The "Law of Effect" has been repeatedly emphasized in the field of psychology. This law states that the connection between a situation and a response is strengthened whenever the response is accompanied by, or is followed by, satisfaction. Responses whether in prison shop or school are frequently marked by indifference. Why? Because the routine is usually devoid of normal satisfactions. A prisoner who operates a machine in prison may be merely doing "busy work" to occupy his time. A prisoner who pours hot metal into a foundry mould to form a state road-marker, or who operates a stamping press to make an automobile license plate, may be serving the state in an exemplary manner yet it is difficult to discover how traits such as honesty, ambition, truthfulness, courtesy, fairness, loyalty, kindness, obligingness, sympathy, respect, courage, friendliness, sociability, unselfishness, and modesty, are engendered by these operations. Would it be possible to operate prison shops as they are operated on the outside?

Would it be too revolutionary to allow the prisoner freedom to arise whenever he liked; to walk to meals alone; to exercise choice at a cafeteria which served only a few simple staple foods; to punch a time clock and learn the meaning of punctuality and regularity; to operate prison shops in a business-like manner and keep books covering the cost of labor and material; to attend a literary club meeting, musicale, or boxing contest in the evening; to go to the library and choose his own books to read; in short, to be allowed the privilege of learning how to live? To appease the public under such a revolutionary program probably one-fourth of the guards could be withdrawn from the prison yard and placed on the prison walls. Of course in almost every prison there are probably seven per cent of the inmates who would not respond to this kind of treatment. However, the welfare of the ninety-three per cent should probably dictate gen-

eral policies in administration. Self-respect, pride, courage and regard for the rights of others certainly cannot be developed through rigid discipline which is foreign to normal human urges and satisfactions. Self-control is learned through practice in self-control. Man learns to inhibit his emotional and instinctive urges to conform to social requirements. Greed and jealousy should not be allowed to destroy the individual.

The foregoing six reasons for the failure of our prisons are only a few of the outstanding factors which are being neglected at present. In fairness to the officials in charge of existing penal institutions it should be stated that the majority of prisons in America today are well managed from the standpoint of economy and restraint. Perhaps some blame for the appalling amount of recidivism found among ex-prisoners should be placed upon those interested in reform who lean upon the theory that "society is to blame" and make only feeble efforts toward salvaging the individual delinquent. Such a blanket assumption affords an alibi for side-stepping the deeper fundamental human problems involved and paves the way for the substitution of visionary schemes for re-making society. A "society" is non-existent without individuals who react and influence each other. Character is chiefly a matter of individual conviction based upon experience in living among other human beings.

The time is ripe for students of crime to survey experimental findings covering human behavior, in addition to evaluating common sense observations, and attempt to apply established principles to the great problem of character formation.