

**INSIDE THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM
AND BEYOND: ONE MAN'S JOURNEY**

Reflection

WRITTEN BY CHUCK TERRY

The other day, while stopped at a red light, I suddenly thought about all the years I spent in “those places.” Cells, segregated chow halls, racial tension, monotony, overcrowded conditions. All the years spent being ordered around by judges, guards, and parole officers. And then I thought about all the people who are there right now. Not only are there many more people doing it than before, but they are doing it for extensively longer periods of time. The

thought chilled me to the bone. It hasn't always been like this.

People used to consider rehabilitation as a valid justification for imprisonment. Those who broke the law were seen as less fortunate

and in need of help. This was when societal goals included using the law to even up the socioeconomic playing field for women and minorities, when social programs designed to fight poverty were being implemented rather than cut, and when popular enemies included communists and crooked politicians. Now many dwell on the harm created by “single-parent families,” “illegal immigrants,” “welfare dependency,” and the evils of affirmative action. And now we have the perfect scapegoat, someone everyone can hate—the criminal.

Today “criminals” are depicted as inherently “bad” people. They are blamed for, among other things, our economic problems, fear of going out at night, dilapidated schools, rundown neighborhoods, and our children's unhappiness. Prisons and all the things that go along with “protecting” the public (alarm systems, more prisons, gated communities, increased budgets for policing, new laws) are “sold” and “bought” as essential mechanisms of control. By keeping “these people” in their place “we” can live “normal,” safe lives.

Our aim now is to punish instead of rehabilitate. Increasing levels of formal social control are the means by which crime is “fought.” We seldom address crime-generating factors such as our market mentality, which revolves around the need to

have, to get, and to have yet more; the increasing economic gap between the “haves” and “have-nots”; capital flight; racism; child abuse; homophobia; chronic unemployment; rampant inequality; economic insecurity; and the desperation that leads to drug addiction and other social ills. Instead, our attention is diverted toward individuals. We seem to blindly accept the sanity of draconian sentencing policies such as mandatory minimum laws that require prison time for selling crack cocaine, even for first-time offenders. Or the “three strikes and you're out” law in California that, though designed to imprison violent offenders, has been twisted and reshaped so that today roughly 70 percent of those going to prison under this law do so for a nonviolent crime. After spending so many years in “those places,” I find what I see today difficult to accept.

Today I find myself around academics and “experts” in the field of criminal justice. I hope that we can learn from each other. I am given the opportunity to write papers like this and speak in front of hundreds of students in undergraduate classes. I feel fortunate to be doing all this, and more than grateful to be free from the grips of addiction and the criminal justice system.

Yet the story is far from over. The nightmare continues. “Those places” are being jammed with bodies faster than they can be built. Prisons and jails become home to the unemployable, addicts, the underprivileged, and outcasts of society. And rather than help, or even punish, doing time on such a massive scale will likely have disastrous effects on individuals, families, and communities that will last lifetimes and beyond. Can it be that we are crippling or incapacitating “those people”? After being oppressed, controlled, and degraded (especially for long periods of time), inmates turn into angry, fearful human beings who are unable to cope with things that people out here deal with all the time. The difficulty of participating in interpersonal relationships, finding and retaining employment, controlling anger, and “fitting in,” to name a few, can become insurmountable obstacles. Yet most of our efforts to do anything about the situation only worsens it.

Efforts to improve sophisticated techniques of identifying, labeling, and monitoring parolees, “gang” members, and other “miscreants” are contin-

ually being developed. The school I attended inside no longer offers college classes—funding was pulled. Lifting weights—a positive, healthy way to release energy—is no longer allowed in many prisons: can't let "them" get too strong.

Today I have a friend in the county jail facing sixty years to life under California's "three strikes" law for possession of less than a gram of cocaine. He is an addict, 48 years old, and if convicted will probably never get out. His first two strikes were for burglaries in the 1970s. Over the last few years he has battled with his addiction and, at one time, made it nearly two years without using. If the laws would have been the way they are today before I got clean, I would have been "striked out" myself. Is there anything wrong with all this?

My hope is that we are entering a new era, one in which we work on replacing blame and increasing levels of social control with understanding and compassion. An era in which we acknowledge the reality of contemporary life, its horrors, and its injustices as well as its joys. And I hope we can begin

to alter the way we view those we perceive as being different from ourselves. All of us have fears. All of us need to belong and fit in somewhere. Oppression, hatred, and blame do not build better lives for anyone. We all need hope.

Reducing violence and crime requires lessening the harm we do to one another—including criminals. I know that, for me, the way I lived for so many years in "those places" affected my self-image, outlook, and actions in such a way that I had become almost completely alienated from everything in the outside world. Luckily, education and my motivation to learn gave me a new perspective and some hope. It helped me see more clearly. I was lucky to make it. Maybe it's time that people out here begin to imagine what it's like to be locked up. What it's like to be pushed into a life of crime, addiction, desperation, and hopelessness. Maybe by taking a closer look at the real factors associated with crime, and by changing the way we "see" those who get caught up in the criminal justice system, we can begin to end the nightmare. ■