

Cultural Daily

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An Invisible Threat Creates a Visible Opportunity to Green and Reform the Prison System

Jenn Robbins · Wednesday, May 6th, 2020

In our fight against the coronavirus pandemic, do we as a society have an obligation to promote the health and safety of incarcerated communities? If the answer is “yes”, the sobering truth is we are failing that basic test in federal prisons. Press reports that as of April 30th, 70% of federal prisoners sampled for the COVID-19 virus tested positive. The risk of contagion to the inmate and free communities is real and growing. The invisible threat of COVID-19 has made visible the plight of America’s prison population.

The United States is the global leader in mass incarceration. Now is the time to take a COVID-19 moment to determine how we can do better. We can address our own personal bias, and how it contributes to our ignorance of or resistance to the reforming and greening of our prison system. We can use this pandemic as an occasion to consider ways to reduce mass incarceration, and make America’s prisons more environmentally compatible and therefore safer and more humane.

COVID-19 outbreak prevention in prisons oftentimes focuses on protection for those on the outside rather than for those on the inside. Advocates and lawmakers alike take into account the bias most of us have toward the incarcerated: an often reviled, and certainly marginalized population of our society. In an effort to sway public opinion, calls to reform often evoke our feelings of superiority and fear: free people ought to care about incarcerated people not because prisoners’ lives matter, but because infected inmates may get free people sick. Pragmatic calls for preventative actions — lessening prison sentences, offering home confinement, reducing arrests, releasing prisoners who cannot make bail, as well as prisoners who are awaiting trial for non-violent offenses — have provoked controversy and fear.

These suggestions aim to improve the environmental odds by lessening the prison population itself as well as the daily movement in and out of prisons (by short-term inmates and workers). Such measures would help safeguard incarcerated communities, and thus, protect free society as a whole. But the proposed measures, however environmentally logical in reducing contagion, have uncovered the bias many free people have. We have become worried and even outraged, commenting on social media and news outlets that convicts (not realizing that many incarcerated people haven’t yet been convicted) would be set free only to commit crimes in their communities or add to chaos or homelessness on the streets. Rather than truly considering the actions being proposed, many of us jump to the worst possible conclusions based on personal bias toward this marginalized population. This is a moment where each of us can examine our own bias, as well as dialogue with others about prison reform and how to address social justice issues of America’s

mass incarceration.

As we examine our own beliefs and engage others in how to reduce the prison population, we will do well to take a moment to address sustainability. How can we make prisons more environmentally compatible and therefore healthier? Many people don't realize that 95% of prisoners nationally are released. "Going green" in prisons, according to Sara Hicks, of GreenBiz.com, helps prevent "jail churn" – a term that describes the "staggering number of inmates who get released...and come right back." Going green can help ensure the success of a released prisoner's re-entry, which will better society as a whole.

Jail churn, according to Ms. Hicks, can be prevented inside prisons in three important ways: by improving the mental environment, increasing environmental job opportunities for returned citizens, and implementing environmental improvements that reduce energy costs per inmate. Here is a summary of Hicks' suggestions in her article: "Environmental Programs Grow A Better Prison System":

1. Improving the mental environment: According to studies conducted by organizations such as Greenpeace and Stanford University, there is a compelling relationship between human mental health and the natural environment. Nature "reduces symptoms of anxiety, stress, and even depression." Considering prisons are one of the most "violent and stressful environments" we know, exposure to nature is of inimitable benefit. Solitary confinement statistics tell us that the 80,000 people each year who are incarcerated "in the hole" are more likely to go on to commit violent crimes once they are released. And the vast majority of inmates are released in their lifetime. One creative example of going green is found at the Snake River Correctional Facility, which screened nature films to inmates in solitary. A study of the Oregon facility heralded the benefits of exposure to the natural environment; this greening of the system "provides far better psychological outcomes for prisoners", which in turn, prevents jail churn.

2. Increasing environmental jobs: Environmental training programs for jobs in gardening and landscaping help prisoners get viable jobs when they are released; making a living is one way that returned citizens resist jail churn. "Gardening training not only helps former prisoners earn \$17/hour jobs," according to Sara Hicks, "But also reduces food deserts and creates more appealing and productive green space, replacing lawns with gardens."

3. Implementing environmental improvements: Since the cost of our mass incarceration is now more than \$50 billion, reducing the carbon footprint of prisoners and making environmental improvements to the infrastructure is a way to go green and make our prisons more environmentally compatible. In a CorrectionsOne.blog post, author Paul Sheldon describes how more efficient lighting, HVAC units, plug-in appliances, motors and pumps, and water/waste systems can save correctional facilities about \$1,000 per inmate/year.

Greening and reforming our prison system is the humane and forward-thinking thing to do if we consider incarceration as an opportunity to rehabilitate inmates (again 95% of whom get released), versus merely one to punish them. In this COVID-19 moment, we not only need to do better right now – to protect the inmate communities and the free communities which surround them – we need to envision a future that commits us to eco and social justice. If we share with returned citizens a desire for them to become contributing members of society, we owe it to them, as well as society as a whole, to improve their environmental conditions while incarcerated, and thereby give them a chance at a physically and mentally sustainable life. If not now, when?

Sources:

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