

Punishment Alone Isn't Working — It's Time to Rethink Corrections

Jay Dellinger, Publisher

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Every day we see stories about crime. We see arrests, convictions and increasingly harsh sentences. Then we open social media and often see the same reaction: "Lock them up and throw away the key."

I understand the anger, especially when someone has been victimized. People who commit crimes must be held accountable and violent criminals who present a serious danger to society may need to remain behind bars for a very long time. But I believe we are missing an important part of the conversation. What happens with everyone else? We call our prisons "correctional institutions." But are we actually correcting anything?

If we take someone who committed a non-violent crime, place that person in a cell for several years, feed and house them at taxpayer expense then eventually release that person with many of the same problems they had when they entered prison, what exactly did we accomplish?

We punished them. But did we correct them? The Taxpayer Is Paying a Tremendous Price. This isn't just a philosophical argument. There is real money involved.

According to the North Carolina Department of Adult Correction, the average cost of incarceration during fiscal year 2024-25 was **$149.92 per inmate every single day**. That works out to approximately **$54,721 per inmate per year**. North Carolina reported an average daily prison population of 31,004 during that same period.

Think about that for a moment, We can spend more than $50,000 a year incarcerating one person. If that individual serves five years, the average incarceration cost alone would be roughly $273,000 at today's rate. Then that person may eventually walk out of prison and return to society. What happens if we haven't changed anything?

The Bureau of Justice Statistics followed prisoners released in 24 states and found that approximately 66 percent were arrested again within three years. Over the 10-year study period, 82 percent were arrested at least once and about 61 percent returned to prison for a new sentence or a probation or parole violation. Those numbers don't mean every former inmate will reoffend and they come from prisoners released in 2008 but they demonstrate just how serious the revolving door problem can be.At some point taxpayers have every right to ask whether we are getting our money's worth.

What If Punishment Actually Repaid the Victim?

Here's another question I believe we should be asking. For appropriate non-violent crimes, why couldn't part of the punishment involve working and paying restitution to the victim? Imagine a structured program where an offender is required to maintain employment, report to supervision, attend counseling or treatment when necessary and surrender a substantial portion of earnings toward court-ordered restitution. Make the offender work. Make the offender pay. Make the offender repair as much of the damage as reasonably possible. Require

community service when appropriate. Require education, job training or treatment. Require regular reporting and drug testing when appropriate. And make it absolutely clear that failure to comply carries consequences. That sounds like punishment to me. More importantly, somebody other than the prison system could actually benefit from that punishment. If we simply incarcerate someone, the victim doesn't necessarily get his or her restitution. The offender isn't necessarily learning how to live differently and taxpayers receive another bill.

Who won?

There must be situations where requiring an offender to work and repay a victim is more productive than taxpayers spending tens of thousands of dollars each year simply keeping that offender behind bars. This wouldn't work for every offender or every crime. Courts would have to consider public safety, criminal history, the seriousness of the offense and the circumstances of the victim. But we shouldn't dismiss alternatives simply because prison is what we have traditionally done.

Prison Should Protect Society From Dangerous People I am not suggesting that we empty our prisons. There are violent criminals who need to be separated from society. Murderers, violent sexual offenders and other dangerous individuals can present a completely different public safety question. Protecting innocent people must always come first. But putting a non-violent offender in the same basic correctional system as a dangerous violent criminal deserves examination. Punishment should fit both the crime and the individual. Addiction Should Be Treated as Part of the Problem We also need a different approach when criminal behavior is being driven primarily by drug addiction. If someone commits a non-violent offense because he or she is trapped in addiction, incarceration without meaningful treatment may simply postpone the problem.

Why wouldn't we attack the addiction?

Treatment doesn't mean there are no consequences. A court-supervised rehabilitation program can be demanding. Participants can be required to attend treatment, remain drug-free, submit to testing, work, report regularly and comply

with strict rules. There is evidence supporting that approach. The National Institute of Justice has reported that adult drug courts reduced drug use and criminal offending compared with traditional case processing in a major multi-site evaluation. The study also found economic benefits from fewer crimes and lower criminal-justice costs.

North Carolina's own numbers illustrate just how different the costs of various approaches can be. While average incarceration cost $149.92 per day in FY 2024-25, ordinary community supervision averaged $9.86 per offender per day. Prison-based alcoholism and chemical-dependency treatment was reported separately at $47.41 per day. Different programs serve different populations so those figures cannot simply be compared dollar-for-dollar but they demonstrate why alternatives deserve serious study.

Don't We Owe It to the Next Victim?

This may be the most important question of all. **Don't we owe it to the next potential victim to try to make sure there isn't one?** Rehabilitation isn't simply about helping the offender. It's about protecting the next person from being harmed. It's about protecting the family whose home might otherwise be burglarized. It's about preventing another drug related crime. It's about preventing another person from becoming a victim. If counseling, addiction treatment, education, employment and structured supervision can change someone's behavior, then rehabilitation becomes a public safety strategy. A prison sentence eventually ends for most incarcerated people. We need to decide what kind of person we want walking through that prison gate on the day the sentence is over.

The Human Brain Can Change

Something I have learned over the years is that the human brain is remarkably adaptable. We can learn. We can unlearn. We can develop new habits and ways of thinking. That doesn't mean everyone will change. It doesn't mean we should excuse criminal behavior and it certainly doesn't mean society should take unnecessary risks with dangerous people. But it does mean we shouldn't

automatically decide that every person who commits a crime is incapable of becoming something better. If someone's thinking helped lead that person into criminal behavior, let's work on the thinking. If addiction contributed to it, let's treat the addiction. If a person lacks job skills, let's teach them. If they owe restitution, let's put them to work and require them to pay it. If they need counseling, provide it. And if they refuse to comply with the opportunity they have been given, then there should be consequences. That is accountability combined with rehabilitation.

Maybe It's Time to Redefine "Tough on Crime"

Being tough on crime shouldn't necessarily mean imposing the longest possible prison sentence. Maybe being truly tough on crime means doing whatever actually produces **less crime**. If rehabilitation reduces repeat offenses, that's tough on crime. If addiction treatment prevents another robbery, that's tough on crime. If restitution makes an offender work to repay a victim, that's accountability. If education turns an offender into a taxpayer instead of someone taxpayers must support in prison, society benefits. And if violent criminals who remain dangerous are kept away from the public, that's protecting society.

We can punish people while still trying to change them.

Those ideas are not opposites. America should have a criminal justice system that protects innocent citizens, respects victims and holds offenders accountable. But it should also recognize that most prisoners will eventually return to our communities. When they do, I would rather have someone who received treatment, learned a trade, developed discipline, worked, paid restitution and was prepared for life outside prison than someone who simply spent years staring at four walls. We already know how to punish people. Maybe it's time we became equally serious about correcting them. Because the ultimate measurement of a correctional system shouldn't be how many people we can put behind bars. It should be how many crimes and victims we can prevent from happening again.