



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

CORRECTIONS

An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of prison

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A new 400-page master plan for meeting the state's future needs for managing an aging prison population (aging in terms of both the inmates and the institutions in which they live) has been sharply criticized by law makers and law enforcers alike. The plan calls for billions of dollars to deal with the state's crowded prison conditions and projected health care costs for lifers and other inmates as they grow old behind prison walls.

The critical response is not at all surprising. Prisons management has long been a lightning rod, as it involves two hot issues--public funds and public safety. There is no doubt that incarceration works as a crime control measure, but at a substantial price tag: effective to be sure; but cost-effective, not so much.

It remains to be seen whether the sentencing reform legislation moving through the State House will significantly impact on future correctional needs. There is some desire to dismantle mandatory minimum sentences for non-violent offenders, yet the three strikes impact on prisoner release may off-set the savings.

Arguably the most sensible response to the corrections master plan belonged to Sheriff Thomas Hodgson of Bristol County who urged a shift in emphasis from prison for the old to prevention for the young:

The problem isn't people are born criminals," said Hodgson. "They grow up in dysfunctional worlds where they don't get the guidance. If we want to deal with this problem honestly then we need to have an honest conversation. You want to stop the rise in prison population? Then invest the money on the front end.

Smart crime fighting involves a balanced blend of enforcement (from community policing to identifying illegal gun markets), treatment modalities (from drug rehab on demand to community corrections and post-incarceration services) as well as general and targeted crime prevention (from family support to summer jobs for high-risk youth). Regrettably, the prevention approach has at times been disparaged as "worthless" and as "soft on crime." Yet, this cynical perspective reflects gross misunderstanding of the process and goals of prevention, and a selective examination of outcomes. Simply put: Prevention programs can work; good prevention programs that are well-implement do work.

Too often, prevention initiatives are funded and implemented on a shoestring, and a rather short shoestring with a brief window of opportunity to show results. This is a recipe for failure and provides additional fodder for skeptics (more on this in my next blog post).

We need more of our lawmakers on Beacon Hill to tackle criminal justice reforms without fearing the Massachusetts liberal label. In many respects, our state is no longer a leader in crafting progressive and innovative policies. The state of Texas reformed its juvenile murder law in ways that have yet to be taken seriously in Massachusetts. Conservative Newt Gingrich recently called for reducing our nation's dependence on incarceration. And as for Sheriff Hodgson, a Republican and a tough law enforcement official, and his advocacy for crime prevention: this liberal academic blogger concurs completely.