

Coalition For Prisoners' Rights Newsletter

Vol. 46-C, No. 9

PO Box 1911, Santa Fe NM 87504

September 2021

IT'S ALL IN HOW WE LOOK AT IT

How are things different from before the pandemic? Our answer: they are the same, but worse—less equal, more discriminatory. And that comes from the basic rule regarding how things are set up in this country: for inequality. Now, more than ever before. The rich are richer, the poor are poorer; those few who have had power before, now have more power over the lives of the rest of us. And we have it drummed into us to accept things as they are, that they are the fault of the "have nots" ourselves. That this is how these are and should be. Although we are occasionally encouraged to work to change glaring injustices minimally.

Some examples: The first is one almost of our readers have direct experience of: the police, court and penal system. We are constantly told that it exists to make our lives safer. The evidence, of course, does not bear this out. We are told, directly or indirectly, that our "problems" of inequality and danger come from poor people and people of color. The facts do not confirm this. We are told that the "solution" to these "problems" is, essentially, more punishment.

Even those advocating present policies and practices do not act in a way that shows they believe in the work they do. Example: if arresting, prosecuting and incarcerating people (overwhelmingly those with no power) makes us safer, how come there is a lack by those in power to release from custody those who have been "made safer" by being in the hands of authorities for years? Somehow, those who say they believe in long prison sentences don't act in a way that reflects they actually believe in doing so makes the lives of others "safer." Punishment, of course, cannot undo anything that has already been done. We need to reduce the conditions that produce harmful behavior.

And, in the meantime, treating people badly, as people locked up overwhelmingly, are, produces both anger and despair in many and does not result in redistribution of power or opportunity or skills that those subjected to imprisonment receive.

Guess what? Things don't change. They are not "supposed" to. As we know, many, released from imprisonment, are returned.

We see the same beliefs, behaviors and results in the functioning of other major institutions whose operation affect us directly. Two examples follow:

School systems. We believe they are in fact is set up to keep things as they are. Poor people get ineffective educational systems, rich ones get ones that keep them in power. Do we really have to accept the elementary school statistics that show, year after year, that low income kids CAN'T learn to read and do arithmetic? We don't believe it. Statistically, schools are not set up to be effective for all. Their funding bases, after all, are property taxes. What poor children, especially those of color, are successfully prepared to do is to fail in ways that help to keep them at the bottom of an entrenched system of rewards and "success" – and punishment and deprivation.

The medical system. We do not have anything that could be accurately called a "public health care system" – as the disastrous and ongoing Covid pandemic management has so repeatedly and thoroughly demonstrated. We have not consistently engaged in the most basic – and essentially free – public health measures to protect ourselves and others: mask wearing and social distancing. No one can deny or harm others by doing or employing them. We are repeatedly told to "follow the science" and all the while the "science" appears to keep changing. So contradictory and incomplete have been our tactics and strategies that it was even startling to hear on the radio recently: "you have to be careful giving any vaccine until you're sure the benefits outweigh the risks." And we ask again who suffers the most from this approach? People of color and other poor people. For a while, we were thanking those were called "essential workers." But those folks now seem to have disappeared.

Until we effectively work together to drastically decrease societal inequality and racism, we will not achieve the changes needed to benefit the majority of us. And the changes we need are big indeed.

LOS VUELOS DE DEPORTACION A HAITI

Activistas en defensa de la justicia para inmigrantes advierten sobre una crisis humanitaria en la frontera sur de Estados Unidos, ya que más de 10.000 solicitante de asilo haitianos han estado pasando varios días en un campamento improvisad debajo de un puente ubicado en la localidad texana de Del Río. Los solicitantes de asilo cruzaron recientemente el río Bravo después dd caminar miles de kilómetros por rutas peligrosas a través de América del Sur, América Central y México.

Mientras tanto, grupos activistas critican al Gobierno de Biden por haber reanudado los vuelos de deportación a Haití, cuando ese país aún continúa sumido en la inestabilidad tras el catastrófico terremoto deles pasado, que dejó a miles de personas sin agua, comida, vivienda y meicinas. Estados Unidos deportó el día 15 a unos 86 solicitantes de asilo haitianos, entre los que se encontraban familias y menores de tres años.

La Haitian Bridge Alliance dijo: "Esto es increíble...Horas después del terremoto de magnitud 7,2, el presidente emitió un comunicado en el que decía que Estados Unidos era un país 'amigo' de Haití..."

THE LEAST READ PART OF THE NEWSLETTER

To receive the CPR Newsletter by postal mail monthly, send us a self-addressed stamped envelope for each month's issue you are requesting, up to 12 at one time. Put the CPR return address in the upper left-hand corner of each envelope you send us.

Five pages (1 ounce), can be sent for one Forever stamp. Ten pages (2 ounces) can be sent for a twenty-cent stamp more.

Please continue to send us address changes, as soon as you can, including both your old and new addresses, to help us keep our mailing list up-to-date.

NONE OF US ARE LAWYERS OR LEGAL WORKERS. Letters send to us marked "Legal Mail" are NOT going to a lawyer, and could possibly result in our losing our access to the prisons they come from. Please don't do it!

Many, many thanks to the Real Cost of Prisons project, which posts our Newsletter on-line monthly for free downloading and distribution. All issues since 2009 are at its great site: realcostofprisons.org

MASTERS DEGREE ON THE LINE!

Earn a masters degree. If you've completed an AA degree, or will have by summer 2022, you may be eligible to enroll in the Humanities Masters degree Program (HUX) at Cal State University, Dominguez Hills: Dr. Matt Luckett, Academic Coordinator, HUX Reboot, P.O. Box 2731, Orangevale CA 95662.

MORE LIFE-WITHOUT-PAROLE SENTENCES

Usually referred to as "LWOP," such sentences are becoming increasingly common. Although in fact "death sentences," they are not execution sentences. Ironically, the people facing such sentences are entitled to only a fraction of the legal resources of those eligible for an execution sentence.

Were prosecutors to opt for charges with an execution sentence possible, the defendant would be guaranteed a pair of lawyers whose expertise in such "capital cases" had been vetted by a court-appointed screening committee. The court would pay for an investigator and a mental health expert. Under national legal guidelines, the defense attorneys would have a special obligation to aggressively assert every possible defense argument.

LWOP trials cost thousands of dollars less than execution-possible cases. They are shorter, involve fewer lawyers, allow limited appeals and often result in plea deals before trial. Support for execution sentences is waning. Execution sentences were down to 18 last year as prosecutors went after LWOPs instead. Jurors seem to be less squeamish about locking people up for the rest of their lives than having them killed outright. Nationally, the total number of people on death rows is about 2,500. Those with LWOP sentences number approximately 56,000 people, up 66% from 2003.

Half the people doing LWOP are in just five states: California, Florida, Louisiana, Michigan and Pennsylvania. Alaska is the only state without an LWOP sentence. OVER 60% OF PEOPLE WITH LWOP SENTENCES ARE BLACK.

To come at this tragedy from a slightly different direction, the number of people with LWOP sentences in the United States today is more than the total number of people imprisoned in 1970: 203,000. LWOP sentences are shunned by other industrialized nations. The European Court of Human Rights has substantially eliminated LWOP in its member nations.

Meanwhile, people of color make up two-thirds of those sentenced to LWOP in the United States. One-fifth of Black prisoners are condemned to such life sentences. It is obvious that the creation of anything approaching a "more fair and just system" depends on ending all such extreme penalties. There are increasing calls to limit sentences to a maximum of 20 years. Source: excerpted from the excellent *San Quentin News*, authors Kevin D. Sawyer and Charles Crow, August 2021 issue, 1 Main St., San Quentin CA 94964.