

Inside The Box

A Prisoner Tells His Tale

By Matthew Hattley

Education vs Incarceration



Matthew Hattley

After several years of researching statistics regarding education and prisons, I've concluded that it would be much cheaper and more productive to educate rather than incarcerate. Education is the way to show individuals where they are making mistakes, the kind that lead to spending years in here.

Statistics already prove that the higher a person's level of education, the less likely they are to commit a crime or reoffend. Receiving an adequate education builds integrity and self-esteem. It also provides productive and marketable skills with which to compete in today's tough job market. The more time someone spends hanging-out on the streets, the greater their chances of getting into serious trouble.

Currently, it costs taxpayers about \$70,000 a year to keep someone in state prison. Oddly enough, it costs \$167,000 to do that on Rikers Island (disturbing, that, when you consider that a prisoner receives more services in a state facility as opposed to a city/county facility like Rikers).

Anyway, it is possible to educate someone for about \$15,000 a year. In essence, you could educate at least eleven people for less than what it costs to house just one of them on Rikers Island.

Here's a thought... Implement a program to offer individuals who face up to ten years of incarceration an alternative — education and/or job training. Hiring teachers at \$50-70,000 a year to teach groups of 15-20 individuals who would otherwise just be sitting in jail would save taxpayers millions. The program would pay for itself. And sure, those who fail to show up or make progress will simply get to serve their original sentence. Give everyone the opportunity to grasp the chance, and progress, before they are warehoused in prison.

A great starting point would be to create a curriculum similar to Pathways in Technology Early College High School (P-Tech), located in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, the very same school that President Obama chose to visit on October 25, 2013 (Congratulations, P-Tech!) If everyone had access to a school like that, the crime rate in New York City would decline dramatically — without the high costs of the NYPD's assistance. Plus, just think of all the money

saved from unnecessary lawsuits when we exclude the police. Education, not prison or physical force, is the logical answer.

Okay, taking someone from a less than educated state, and someone convicted of a crime, to place them in a position to obtain their GED or high school diploma and then allowing them to move on to a college degree and eventually a master's degree, would take about seven years, possibly eight. But even spending the money for seven or eight years worth of quality education would cost a fraction of the \$490-500,000 it would take to keep that person in prison for the same period of time. And even on a shorter sentence, with high likelihood of re-offending and re-arrest, you can add in the costs of police and courts, too, and none of those services are inexpensive. Best of all, once a person graduates with a degree their chances of committing a crime shrivel to slim to none (less than 1 percent). So not only is a lot of money saved, but communities are strengthened in the process, a real win-win situation.

As for those already incarcerated... since Pell grants are no longer available, each facility should strongly support and encourage surrounding colleges to offer and teach classes in that facility. This wouldn't have to cost the taxpayers a single cent. The college programs already available to prisoners are funded via private donations. Contrary to some popular beliefs, said contributors genuinely support granting prisoners a second chance at living a normal life in society. Unfortunately, funding these kinds of programs has never been a problem. The problem has been educators gaining access to the various prison facilities.

There's a fundamental social problem here. How can anyone expect specific impoverished communities to thrive, to get jobs, to start businesses, when such large percentages of teenagers and young adults are being incarcerated? Our community leaders and politicians need to focus on creating and implementing more educational and job training programs, not removing them! The primary objective should be keeping our youth home with their families and out of prison and the morgue. If you really want "safer streets" here's your opportunity to prove it.

Crime, drugs, prison — these corrosive things have a way of moving up the social ladder. Even those in a position of power can suffer the consequences of having a family member become involved, or perhaps wind up assaulted, robbed, even murdered. Drugs are everywhere; crime is not exclusively an "inner city problem." Prevention is so much better than reaction.

So, dear readers (and leaders)... do something that will benefit the entire state, not just the wealthy and privileged; support education over incarceration!

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The Importance of Communication



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For prisoners who want to stay in touch with the outside world, there are three ways of doing so: 1) correspondence, 2) telephone calls and 3) visits.

Under certain circumstances, for disciplinary reasons, these privileges may be revoked or suspended for an extended period of time, depending on severity of the offense. Other problems include "blocks" being put on a phone line by, say, a relative — to prevent our calls to them from being processed, as well as the hassle of travelling anywhere from 60 to 300 miles to visit a prisoner, which is expensive, even by car, and time consuming.

So once you think about all this you can see that writing a letter takes on a whole new meaning. For many of us, this is our primary means of expressing our deepest thoughts and feelings to those in society. It's the only way we can remain in the loop with family and friends. For many of us, this is also the primary means of expressing our deepest thoughts and feelings to those out there. And fortunately, a postage stamp only costs 46¢.

Letters show us that not only is someone thinking about us, but that they care enough to make the time to write a

few lines. Hearing from family and friends provide us with a sense of connection, something to help us maintain our sanity in here. Plus — and it's an important plus — the more frequently a prisoner communicates with the outside world the easier it will be for him to make a positive transformation back into society upon his eventual release.

Now, depending on where you live, a letter will usually reach you within three days or so. Under normal circumstances a person can write and receive a reply within a week. In here, we can only send and receive mail Monday to Friday; there is no weekend delivery for us.

Unfortunately, we're on the wrong side of the great change in technology. Today's mania for social networking, from texting to Tumblr, means people are accustomed to receiving instant replies. They no longer have the patience to write an actual letter and then wait days for a reply. But what society views as obsolete and inconvenient, we view as a necessity. Of course, a visit is great, and it's always wonderful to physically see and speak to someone, but a letter we can re-read whenever we have the time and need to do so. We really draw hope and strength from that, and it helps us continue moving forward.

So... if you have a family member or friend who is incarcerated, take a few minutes and show them some love by writing a brief letter. Expect to receive a 3 to 5 page reply. We have a lot to say and share!

To avoid (painful) misunderstandings, please respond promptly to all of our letters. Silence speaks volumes. If you can't for some reason, please explain why at a later date; don't leave room for speculation, doubt and worry. Honesty is the best policy. If you don't feel like writing, just a basic greeting card would suffice. Anything beats a blank. Out there in society, you are surrounded by family and friends. Everyone is a text away, a simple drive away to meet. In here, we are alone. And regardless of what some may believe, incarceration does not render us inhuman. Many of us simply made some bad decisions in the past.

Furthermore, photographs are also really important. They don't have to be of you, or even of a person. There's an entire world out there that we haven't seen with our own eyes in decades. The neighborhoods we come from have changed, the change of seasons sets a tone and brings back fond memories for us. In essence, you can become our eyes by sharing those beautiful sights with us.

Of course, if you haven't seen your loved one in more than four months, a surprise visit is in order. Even if it's only for an hour or two. Show them that you miss them and you love them.

If nothing else, prison has taught me this: the small things usually mean the most.

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The Relevance of Education: Pre and Post Incarceration



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A person's educational level is a key factor when it comes to prison statistics. The lower your ability to comprehend the fundamentals, the greater your risk of being arrested and convicted of a crime, especially if you are a young black male in America. Education is crucial to achieving success in life going beyond just owning materialistic stuff, especially if that stuff is obtained illegally.

Unfortunately, a large percentage of those from the NYC area start off at a disadvantage — the schools we attend are not adequately funded. Educators are expected to perform at higher than average capacity with minimal moral and financial support. It's not a surprise, then, that the majority of the NY state prison population comes from just five specific neighborhoods in NYC.

This is no secret to our politicians, but they've simply refused to address this destructive situation for decades now. It's time our communities express their dissatisfaction with said politicians' lack of interest and action towards what's really important. They can be replaced at the next election. Collectively we have the power to bring forth change.

Here's the problem — when you have 12, 13, and 14 year old children honestly believing that they possess all the answers and controlling their neighborhoods — yet their math and reading levels have not exceeded the fourth grade — you have a dangerous situation.

Out of this group come those who will get pregnant very young, who will start using drugs and alcohol, who will lose all respect for adults, who will drop out of school and worst of all, who will believe that a life of crime is their best option. Well, they just don't know enough. They don't see that they'll be spending most of their lives in here, behind walls... if, that is, they don't get killed. They don't see the huge waste of life that this represents. Obviously they have been misinformed. They are at a critical stage in life because their minds have not yet fully developed, though their bodies are almost adult. They require positive input and love at this point.

This is why education is imperative. You have to have the skills to assess every situation logically and rationally. If you can't read, or do arithmetic, how can you navigate through modern society? Answer: barely, if at all. Our young people need to learn the difference between ignorance and intelligence. They should understand that the prison system is full of the ignorant, who may well be intelligent, too. Adults must acknowledge the impact that their silence and inaction has when they allow youth to veer from a positive path and do as they please. Everyone has to grasp the fact that every action, good or bad, has both short and long term consequences. Children have to see the difference. Show them what a successful life is like and then what a destructive lifestyle produces. Most children will require more than a verbal lecture, but if you supply them with enough information to make an informed decision? Well, in essence this is crime prevention. We have to teach by example. Children are very easily influenced and they copy what they see in their homes, on the street, in movies and music video.

Education begins at home and parents have to get completely involved in their child's growth and development. This means setting rules and assigning chores and making sure that chores and homework are completed before anyone gets to step outside. They have to be exposed to discipline and responsibility. Strong morals and values must be instilled.

The children are our future leaders. If we do not assist and support them to become successful, what does that say about us or our integrity? It really does take a community to raise a child; everyone must participate... there's no room any longer for excuses. You face the basic question: what are you? Part of the problem or the solution?

As for those of us already incarcerated, if you don't have your GED already, get it immediately unless you really enjoy living in poverty! Education is the only way to obtain decent jobs once you're released. The objective has to be to be able to take care of a family while living comfortably. To get there, we need to expand our thought patterns so we can view life from a totally different perspective, one where we become productive, law-abiding citizens in our communities. We need to become the mentors we were supposed to be from the beginning.

The longer it takes for us as a community to get this — that we have to ensure that our youth get educated — the longer it will be that we fill prison cells or cemeteries. Let's get serious and stop attempting to blame someone else, and take responsibility for creating a better tomorrow for us and our future generations. Doing nothing would be a terrible mistake, and we would have only ourselves to blame for continuing the present situation. Education is the way out; education is the answer!

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The Marriott It's Not



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After you are sentenced at your county court, you will shortly be transferred and released to the custody of a "state" reception center. Upon arrival there you are placed in a large holding pen with several dozen other prisoners and your shackles are removed. Then you will be removed to another holding pen and the process of entering the "system" begins in earnest. Most of those around you are prepared for this, since it's not their first time; others are simply scared to death from all the stories they've heard, the majority of which are true!

First: You will receive a seven digit New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision identification number (DIN#). The first two numbers represent the year you were processed (93, 05, 13, etc.), the single letter A, B, or R represents the reception center that processed you. The most common is A, which stands for the downstate C.F., since the majority of the prison population are from NYC. The last four numbers represent the order in which you were processed, 0001 to 9999.

Second: You will receive your standard state issued clothing: four pairs of green pants; three green short-sleeved shirts; one green winter coat— 65 percent polyester, 35 percent cotton; six white T-shirts; six white undershorts; six pair white socks; three white handkerchiefs; one white long sleeved dress shirt; one green sweat shirt — no hood; one pair black 5" work boots (non-descript design) and one pair white low-top canvas sneakers (similar to Converse Chuck Taylors). The pants, shirts and winter coat are referred to as "state greens." All the above are now your responsibility; they will accompany you on all transfers. Said clothing is not only chintzy, but is manufactured in NYS prison industries (CORCRAFT). The footwear, however, is made in China.

Third: You must render all your personal property to the correction officer. Yes, even your underwear. You are given two options. 1) Mail all the items home at your expense. 2) Destroy all items. There is no half and half on this, no mailing some items and destroying others; it's mail or destroy everything. The only exceptions are your wedding band, necklace and charm, if they meet DOCCS' criteria and/or religious items such a Bible, Koran or prayer beads, etc. These items will be placed in your personal property envelope and returned to you at the next facility.

Fourth: Let the process of degradation really begin. After stripping you naked, in plain view of those around you, you are directed to the shower area where you are instructed to apply a shampoo which kills lice into any and all areas on your body containing hair. Then you will take a three minute ice cold shower. After you dry off and get dressed in

your new prison clothing, you are required to sit in a barber's chair to have your facial hair and head shaved bald; the only exception to this being court-ordered relaxation for Native Americans and Rastafarians.

Fifth: You will be placed in yet another holding pen where you will be fed lunch or dinner. Once everyone is finished, they will call you by name to exit the holding pen and received a "set-up," which consists of two full size 54" x 99" white sheets, one white pillow case and one green towel, 20" x 40". These sheets and pillow case are 50 percent polyester, 50 percent cotton. There are no 500 thread count pima cotton sheets in the system. They do not provide you with a pillow in reception.

You will now be escorted to your temporary housing complex. When you reach your complex, you will be assigned a single cell. There you will find a steel welded frame bed, a small locker 22" x 16" x 14", a chair and desk — two separate pieces of steel, which are attached to the wall, plus a light fixture above the chair and desk, and a stainless steel toilet/sink combo with a stainless steel mirror above. The walls are concrete block, and there is one window with steel bars.

For the bed there is a 32" x 75" x 4" vinyl covered foam mattress (no posturepedic in here) and a green blanket. At the sink is a toothbrush and a tube of toothpaste, a small bar of soap 2" x 1" x 2". A roll of toilet tissue and an NYS "Standard of Inmate Behavior" handbook complete the layout in your cell. The locker, mattress and soap are made by CORCRAFT. The toothbrush and toothpaste come from NYS Industries for the Disabled, Inc.

Within 24 hours of your arrival you will be permitted to make fifteen minute collect phone calls, and start receiving visitors, up to four at a time. You will be allowed a six minute shower every other day. A corrections officer provides you with a single edge disposable razor once a week during mandatory cell clean up. During the process you are locked in your cell and all supplies are handed to you through the vertical slot in your door. When you have used the razor, you return it to the C.O.

You are required to stand up in front of your door, fully dressed with the light on, during every count. There is absolutely no talking, to anyone, at count time. All conversation stops at 9 p.m.

While at the reception facility you have extremely limited movement. Your daily recreation consists of gallery rec (TV, phones, card games), yard or gym. The latter two are offered on a rotating basis. With the exception of these activities, and the escorted walk to the mess hall three times a day, you spend most of your time in your cell. For reading there is a slim selection of novels.

On average the reception process lasts 3 to 4 weeks. Then you are transferred to one of the many maximum-security prisons to begin your bid.

Unfortunately, the amenities are not even close to the Marriott, nor an Econolodge or a Motel 6. To avoid experiencing all these things for real, do not commit any crimes.