

It's Time To Correct Correction's Policies

One of our nations greatest strengths is its belief in capitalism. Since Adam Smith's "The Wealth of Nations" America has reaped numerous benefits from accepting that one's own self-interest is a driving force behind their productivity. And as I learn more about economics I become astonished by certain policies in the Illinois Department of Corrections.

Full disclosure— I've been in prison 8 years serving a 30 year sentence for cannabis convictions. In no way do I approve of my prior mistakes; however, being in prison doesn't mean I lack the ability to see the need for specific policy changes.

In 2010 IDOC's budget was 1.4 billion, and that's without accounting for the 3000+ extra inmates that have been in custody due to the suspension of the MGT/SMGT good-time. With a potential 15 billion dollar budget gap Illinois is going to have to make some difficult decisions.

No one wants to release violent criminals or threaten society's safety, but there are policy considerations that would help fill our fiscal gap without doing either of those. In particular is IDOC's policy regarding "Earned Good Conduct (EGC) Credits," which is a good-time that can be earned by going to school, participating in drug rehabilitation/treatment or earning a G.E.D.— all which are statistically tied to lower recidivism rates. However, only specific inmates are eligible to receive the EGC credits and those with a class X conviction are not eligible.

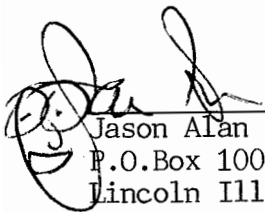
So what is the class X conviction? It was introduced in 1978 for the most serious, heinous and violent crimes, such as murder, aggravated kidnapping and child molestation/rape. Crimes that are gut wrenching to think of. But flash forwards to 2011 and selling marijuana can earn you the class X. No guns, no violence, it doesn't matter; you still could not earn the same good-time credits car-jackers, burglars and murderers do. Yes, I said murderers — second degree murder is still eligible for EGC credits.

As I write this I am surrounded by people playing cards who do not have a G.E.D. And sadly, some who would struggle to read this letter. It hurts me to watch so much potential sit idle. Last year, as we all heard of the 1700 early releases, I was helping a young man study for his G.E.D. Being a class Xer, several of his "friends" told him there wasn't a reason to earn his G.E.D. because he couldn't earn the good-time. Thankfully he didn't listen. This led me to a crazy thought; What if IDOC awarded good-time (EGC credits) to nonviolent offenders not based on if they were a class Xer or not but on how they served their time— on whether they

were "good" or not?

Yes, some would earn their G.E.D only because they'd earn the same good-time others already receive, but would that really be a horrible thing? At the end of the day they would still have to demonstrate improved reading and writing abilities. In Rich Lowry's Dec. 29th column he spoke of a 15% unemployment rate for high school drop outs, and I know a felony conviction wouldn't make finding a job any easier. Maybe that's why 89% of people who parole without a G.E.D. return to prison within three years. The good news is that number dramatically drops as their education increases. So why not incentivis something that has already been proven to drastically reduce recidivism?

I believe IDOC policies were written by good people with good intentions, but there are shortfalls and now that a 66% state income tax has been passed to deal with our 15 billions dollar budget gap it is clearly time to have an honest discussion about reforming specific policies, especially in regards to the EGC credits. I didn't write this to try and directly benefit myself. If the policy changes only applied to convictions after 2010 that would still be a huge step in the right direction. I wrote this letter because right is right and specific IDOC policies are not. Adam Smith acknowledged the power of one's own self-interest benefiting all society through their productivity and it is time for Illinois to capitalize off IDOC incentivising all non violent offeneders to put their time to a positive and productive use. In 1978, when the class X category was created, ~~to~~ deal with the most heinous and serious crimes, I honestly do not believe a non-violent marijuana dealer was who they had in mind. Maybe it's time to re-think the issue.



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