

Drug Sentences Doing More Harm Than Good

Dear Editor:

Our U. S. Attorney General recently declared our drug sentences are doing more harm than help, saying we need to rethink our approach. With nearly 50,000 prisoners, and a 1.3 billion dollar prison budget, Illinois definitely needs to heed these words.

According to the Illinois Department of Corrections in 2009 the recidivism rate for those who paroled without a G.E.D. was 89% - 40 percentage points above those who had one. Prison is filled by people who desperately need help, but it can be frightening to admit you can barely read and write, or do simple math such as fractions. And this fear stops many from ever entering the classroom, making a job application seem like a daunting and insurmountable task upon their release. I have seen this first-hand for almost eleven years. I am serving a 30-year sentence for cannabis offenses and I am tired of seeing so much wasted potential, and having to acknowledge the existence of an 89% recidivism rate.

To combat this problem Illinois created the Earned Good Conduct Credit - and it works! It's an incentive that provides that needed push to enter the classroom and it helps many realize that they too can be so much more than their failures. Some may respond, "So? They're criminals, and they should go to school regardless. There is a lot of truth to that statement, but it misses the bigger picture. People do not end up in prisons by making good decisions, and walking into a jail cell doesn't magically change their way of thinking, but education does. EGC credits encourages G.E.D. completion, which is proven to reduce recidivism by over 40%. That essentially means 40% less crime upon their release and thus, 40% less victims. Isn't that something we should all support?

Unfortunately we are not using this program to its fullest potential. Due to Class X sentencing many first-time, nonviolent offenders are not eligible. In 1978 the Class X category was introduced for the most heinous and violent crimes, such as murder, child molestation and rape. It was meant for crimes that were so vile that nobody would want them out of prison early. So in 1996 the EGC credit was designed to exclude all Class X crimes. But today we have made some nonviolent cannabis offenses a Class X, meaning in the eyes of Illinois prison policy they are treated just as a "heinous" crime.

Multiple decades in prison for nonviolent offenses is exactly why IDOC is overcrowded. Moreover, the exclusion of such offenders from the very incentives we devised to help them is insane - do we really believe any cannabis sales should be the same class crime as child molestation? And the absurdity doesn't stop there. To learn how some cannabis sales come to be seen as "more heinous" than a second-degree murder go to www.realcostofprisons.org/writing, then locate Spyres: Letter to Quinn.

Contact your state politicians and tell them this isn't right and to rectify the EGC program.

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