



PRISON TRANSPARENCY PROJECT REPORT:

Redesigning the Purpose and Function of Prisons

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REDESIGNING THE PURPOSE AND FUNCTION OF PRISONS

Reimagining the Role of Prisons

- **Who Should Be Incarcerated:** Prisons should be reserved for individuals who pose a genuine danger to society—those who commit serious crimes such as murder (not in self-defense), rape, molestation, kidnapping, and severe robberies. These are individuals who have caused real harm to others and who may be unsafe to live freely among the public.

- **Victimless Crimes:** Individuals who commit victimless crimes, where no one is harmed, should not be incarcerated. The current practice of imprisoning people for such offenses based on technicalities of the law is both costly and ineffective, often leading to unnecessary and costly punishment rather than justice.

Focusing on Intent and Safety

- **Determining Harm:** In cases where harm has occurred, it is crucial to determine whether the act was intentional, a result of self-defense, or accidental. Only those who intentionally, recklessly, and inappropriately cause harm should be considered for incarceration, as they pose a potential ongoing risk to others.

- **Rehabilitation over Punishment:** The primary focus of incarceration should not be punishment, but rehabilitation. The goal should be to help individuals learn to operate as social human beings who respect others' rights and can reintegrate into society safely.

The Failures of the Punishment Model

- **High Recidivism Rates:** The current punitive model of incarceration has proven ineffective, as evidenced by high recidivism rates. This model does little to change behavior, instead reinforcing negative patterns that lead to re-offending.

- **Costly and Inefficient:** Punishment-focused prisons are expensive to operate, requiring extensive security measures and staffing to manage the violence and instability that this environment fosters. By treating inmates like animals, the system creates conditions that make them more likely to behave as such, leading to a cycle of violence and retribution.

- **Consider the Children:** Approximately 2.6 million American children are growing up without a parent because their mother and/or father is incarcerated by government; these generational traumas are causing tremendous and lifelong damage to too many of our young citizens and must be rethought.

A New Design for Prisons

- **Investing in Rehabilitation:** Prisons could operate at a much lower cost if resources were redirected from security measures to mental healthcare services, real vocational training, and programs that treat inmates with respect and humanity. These investments would pay off in the form of reduced recidivism and more successful reintegration into society. It would likely also make prison safer for both incarcerated persons as well as staff who work in the carceral environment.

- **Humanizing the Prison Environment:** When inmates are treated like human beings—with respect, opportunities for personal growth, and a focus on their well-being—they are more likely to respond positively. Prisons should be designed to foster a sense of dignity and self-worth in inmates, helping them develop the skills and mindset necessary to live productive, prosocial lives upon release.

Moving Forward with a New Vision

- **Redefining Prison's Purpose:** The purpose of prison should be to protect society by rehabilitating those who are genuinely dangerous, not to punish or dehumanize. The goal of justice is to rebalance what gotten off kilter, as symbolized by the scales of justice. Government does not need to engage in vengeance, retribution, or punishment. When citizens engage in those types of behaviors, they are punished. It is fundamentally hypocritical for government to engage in the types of behaviors it tells citizens not to. A reimagined prison system would focus on making inmates better equipped to rejoin society as responsible, law-abiding citizens, well prepared to contribute to society.

- **Legislative and Structural Reform:** To achieve this vision, comprehensive legislative and structural reforms are needed. This includes reevaluating who is incarcerated, shifting the focus from punishment to rehabilitation, and investing in programs that address the root causes of criminal behavior.

This report is part of a series produced by the Prison Transparency Project, aimed at uncovering and addressing issues within the prison system. For additional reports and recommendations, please visit our website at <https://prisontransparency.com>.