

Can Prisons Succeed When Society Has Failed?

Our jails and prisons are failing. Who is to blame? Some say the prisons. Others, the criminals inside. Isn't it time we examined the real CAUSE? — society itself!

by William R. Whitehart
Photography by Don Lorton

HIS NAME is James C., age 24. He has spent 90 percent of his time behind bars since his family broke up about ten years ago. Today, James C. is more than capable of blowing a safe, carving a spoon into a dagger, smuggling dope into prison, and stealing cars by crossing the ignition wires. He says there is no crime he cannot now commit with considerable finesse, thanks to the in-service training he received from other inmates in prison.

Look at the Record

Most prisons, instead of helping correct criminal behavior, have become breeding grounds of crime and violence. The whole prison system is, in the words of President Nixon, "a convincing case of failure."

What are the reasons for their failure?

Who is at fault — the prisoners, the guards, the prison administrators?

Or, have we been focusing on the *effects* in prison when we should have discovered the *causes* in society that produce a criminal in the first place?

Have we asked the prisons to do what society outside has failed to do?

It's time we soberly faced the facts.

Out-of-Sight, Out-of-Mind

For most people, the minority behind bars is out-of-sight, out-of-mind — out-of-mind, that is, until dramatically thrust into the public spotlight by a riot or revolt such as occurred at Attica, New York, where 43 men lost their lives.

Yet, most prisoners eventually return to society where (in some nations) up to two out of three are re-arrested for another crime within five years of release. This vicious cycle speaks for itself. Most of those put behind prison walls are already significantly lacking in self-control and personal responsibility. Most who are

released are still unable or unwilling to discipline their minds, emotions, and behavior.

Actually, prisons are attempting to accomplish a seemingly impossible task: rooting out ingrained character defects formed over years in a faulty environment.

Experiment in Responsibility

In an unprecedented effort to accomplish behind prison walls what society has failed to do on the outside, Washington State Penitentiary decided to take a step forward. Our readers should know about this remarkable experiment in responsibility.

Last year, the state's largest prison, located on the outskirts of Walla Walla, granted its convicts a measure of self-government unparalleled in prison history. To view the innovations firsthand, *The PLAIN TRUTH* sent staff members to visit the institu-





tion. There they observed prisoners being given the chance to develop personal responsibility and decision-making. Hardened criminals were learning how to rule their own attitudes and behavior in a relaxed, flexible prison environment unlike any other in the world.

A constitution, drawn up by inmate "residents" (what the prisoners now call themselves) in conjunction with the administration, allows prisoners to have a personal part in learning principles of government and responsibility. In it are provisions for a resident government composed of officials elected from among the inmates at large. This enables the prisoners to learn leadership and at the same time to take part in the process of self-rule.

Under the new organization, inmates are given the opportunity to initiate certain changes. The major ones imposed thus far have included the elimination of the strip cell, the censorship of mail, and the checking of items coming into the institution. The prisoners know that with these privileges comes the responsibility of handling them with discretion. Misuse could mean a return to the way things were before — something none of them want.

There are other opportunities for inmates to learn responsibility and self-control. Without guards at their shoulders, the prisoners often put their best foot forward to take visitors on regular tours of the institution. Those men not serving fixed-term sentences can be granted furloughs lasting up to 30 days to be spent at home. Under the "Take a Lifer to Dinner" program, lifers (those serving a life sentence) can be taken to dinner by staff members and guards — something which makes these men

"RESIDENT" AT WALLA WALLA sheds his prison uniform in favor of more comfortable civilian street clothes. This is all part of Washington State Prison system's new approach in its treatment of prisoners.

feel that there is even hope and concern for them.

Ingenuity and creativity are encouraged. The men are allowed to decorate their cells according to personal taste. Some of the cells are so lavishly decorated that from the inside it is nearly impossible to tell that the enclosure is a prison cell. In this way, the men learn to be constructive and creative in a positive manner.

When compared to other penal institutions, the experiment thus far works well. It demands the exercise of character, leadership, and decision-making on the part of the prisoners themselves — something most prisons fail to teach. Most observers feel that the innovations constitute a definite step in the right direction.

But if we expect Walla Walla — or any prison — to succeed in really tackling the mounting global problems of crime and violence, we are greatly mistaken! Prisons may be able to take some definite steps in the right direction. But to get at the heart and core of the crime problem involves much more than the prisons are capable of handling.

Prisons are designed to treat the effects of crime by imprisoning men who have already become criminals. They are virtually powerless to control the major CAUSES in society which produce criminals in the first place.

We will now focus our attention on these causes, grouping them into four major categories.

One: Crime's "Kindergarten" — the Broken Home

Today's society, all too often, seems almost geared to the production of criminals. It's as if the prisons stand at the end of a long road leading from one "crime factory" to the next. The story of most criminals is failure: failure at school, failure on the job, failure in practically everything attempted in life, including crime, but most of all, failure in the home.



P.O.W.

Tutoring for most would-be criminals begins in the home — society's most basic building block — and proceeds from there. When the family is broken or is significantly unstable, as many are today, the home environment is conducive to antisocial attitudes and behavior. Youngsters, growing up without meaningful and loving parent-child relationships, are immediately deprived of the ingredients necessary for emotional growth: family love, warmth, guidance, unity, and cooperation.

Interviews with inmates bear out this most tragic of human failures. As one Walla Walla inmate told me, "Most of us are from bad seed. About all we've known is bickering, fighting, and turmoil."

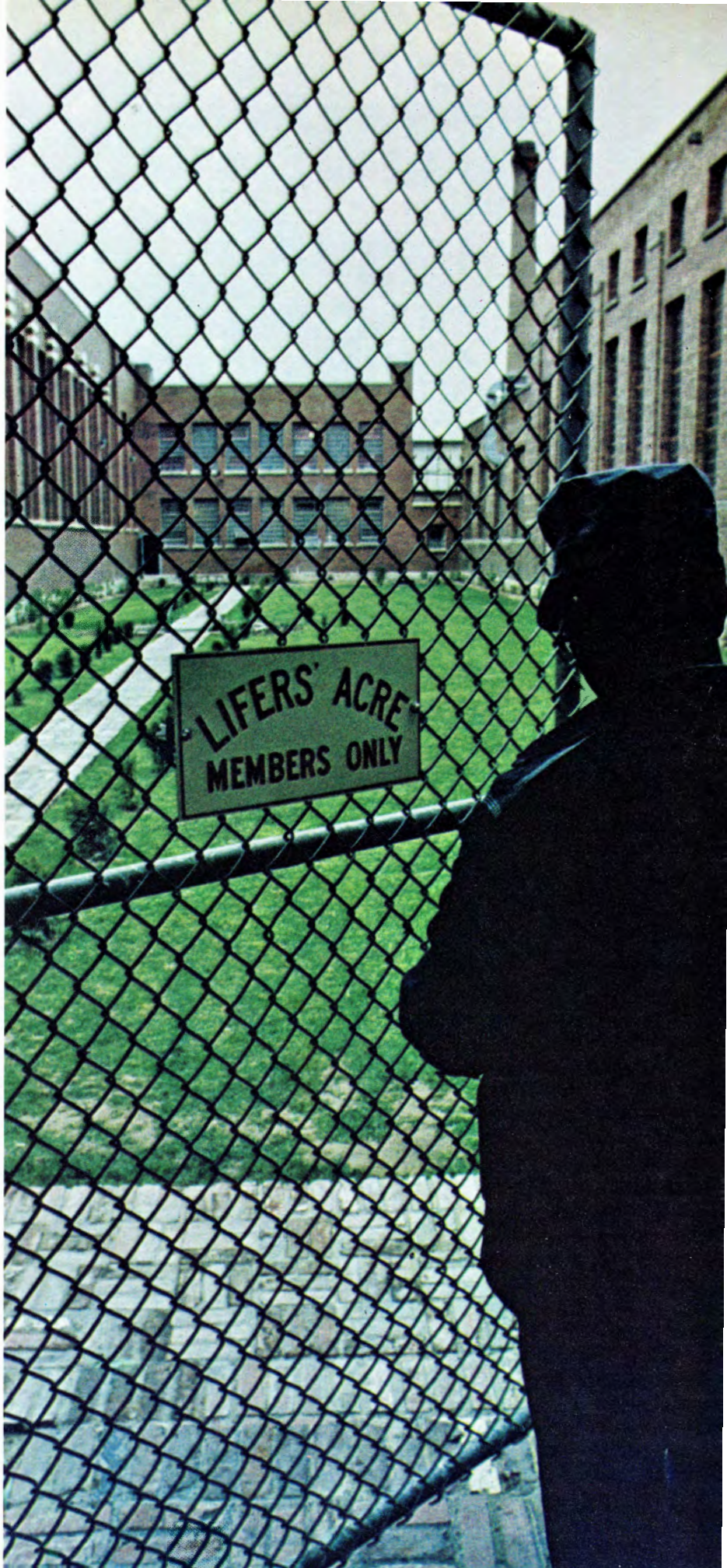
The tragedy is compounded in that coming from a broken home often means establishing another one. Most criminals who failed in their own marriages admit that they themselves came from weak or nonexistent homes. The result: generation upon generation of deprived, misguided, emotionally unstable youngsters ushered down the path of crime. Why is society unable to stop this vicious cycle of crime?

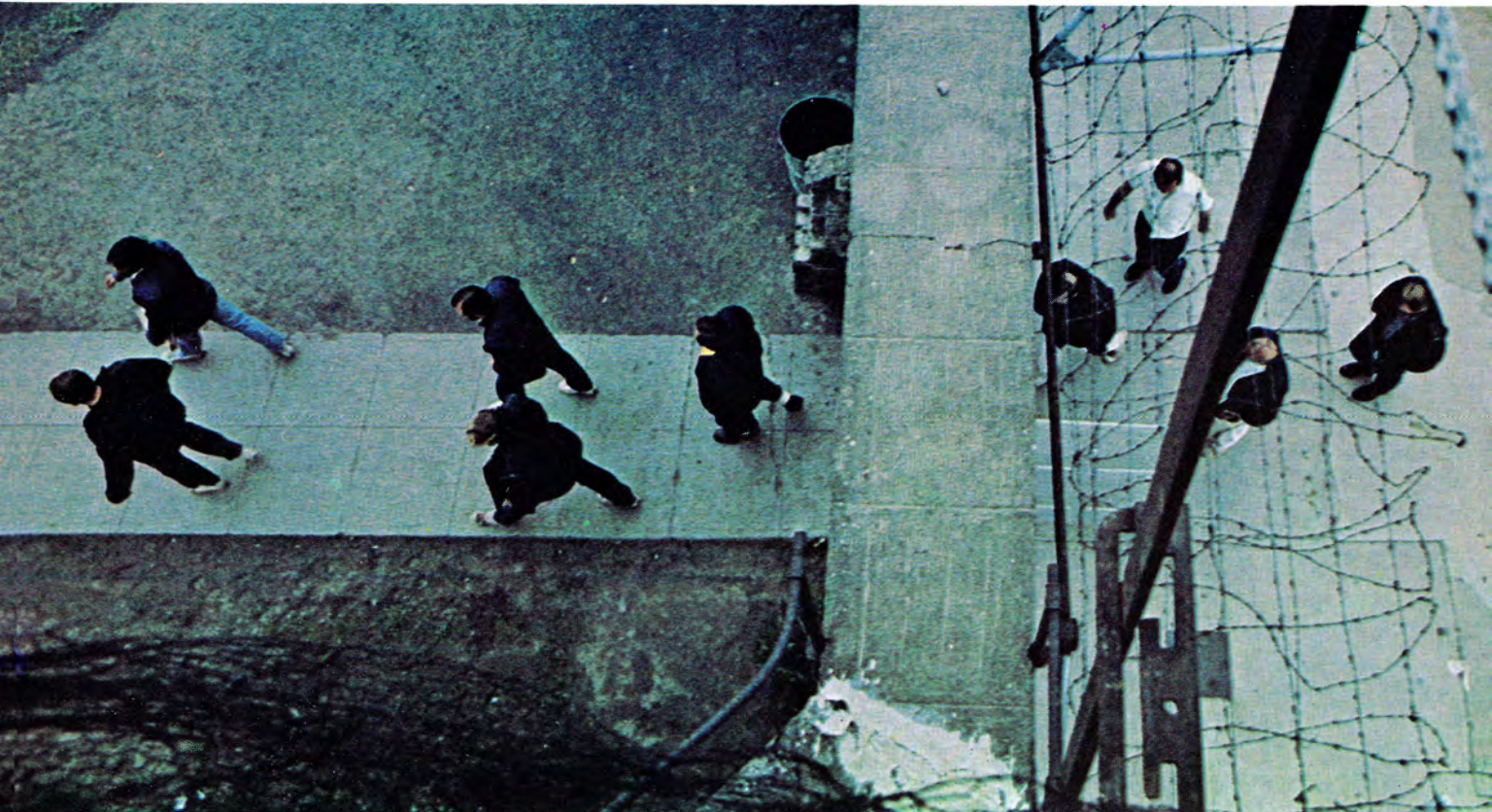
Prisons cannot be asked to patch up the broken homes. They attempt, by definition, to treat the *effects* of the broken homes of a generation ago. They are powerless to do anything about the *causes* which exist in the broken homes of today.

Is it rational to expect prisons to remove this major seedbed of crime that is, in fact, the responsibility of society?

HOME, SWEET HOME — what used to be four gray walls have become unrecognizable as a prison cell. At Walla Walla "residents" have the opportunity to decorate their own cells as they see fit (left).

Prisoner (right) enters "lifers'" club area in Walla Walla. "Lifers With Hope" is an exclusive key club in which all members are serving life sentences. All other prisoners are excluded.





Two: Society's "Crime Factories"

Once a bad foundation has been laid at home, an individual is usually well on his way to a life of crime. But a host of other "crime factories" in society comprise the second major cause of crime which the prisons can little control.

To many youths, *school* is boring and irrelevant. Lacking the knowledge of a real purpose in life and how to tackle and solve life's problems, educational systems find themselves turning off youngsters by the tens of thousands.

Today's teen-agers believe that they are seeking the answers to life like perhaps no other generation has. And yet, the schools find themselves incapable of providing either adequate answers or viable solutions to young people's problems.

Most prison inmates admit they were turned off by school at an early age. Many did not attend long enough even to learn how to read and write. Less than five percent of all

prisoners have a high school diploma.

In view of this, is it logical to think that prisons can solve the many crime-producing problems created by meaningless instruction?

The *ghetto-youth culture* of big cities is another spawning ground of criminality. Urban life-styles are replete with vice. The sprawling urban megalopolises (and increasingly, the suburbs) are producing an ever-greater number of youthful offenders each year.

Many fit the standard pattern: young, hostile, turned-off toward the "establishment." Their character, or lack of it, and subsequent criminal behavior, is reflected by their widespread misuse of drugs, alcohol, and sex.

Prisons cannot cure the crime-spawning environments of our big cities!

Due to *widespread deprivation and poverty*, many individuals turn to crime when no other means of financial support appears available. Unemployment and job discrimination, as well as apathy and general laziness,

are primary factors causing crimes such as burglary and armed robbery. As one Walla Walla inmate told me, "I had trouble getting a good job in the first place, and once I had a record it was impossible. I had to learn crime to survive."

Are the prisons supposed to shoulder the responsibility of eliminating the economic causes of crime?

Three: The "Game of Crime"

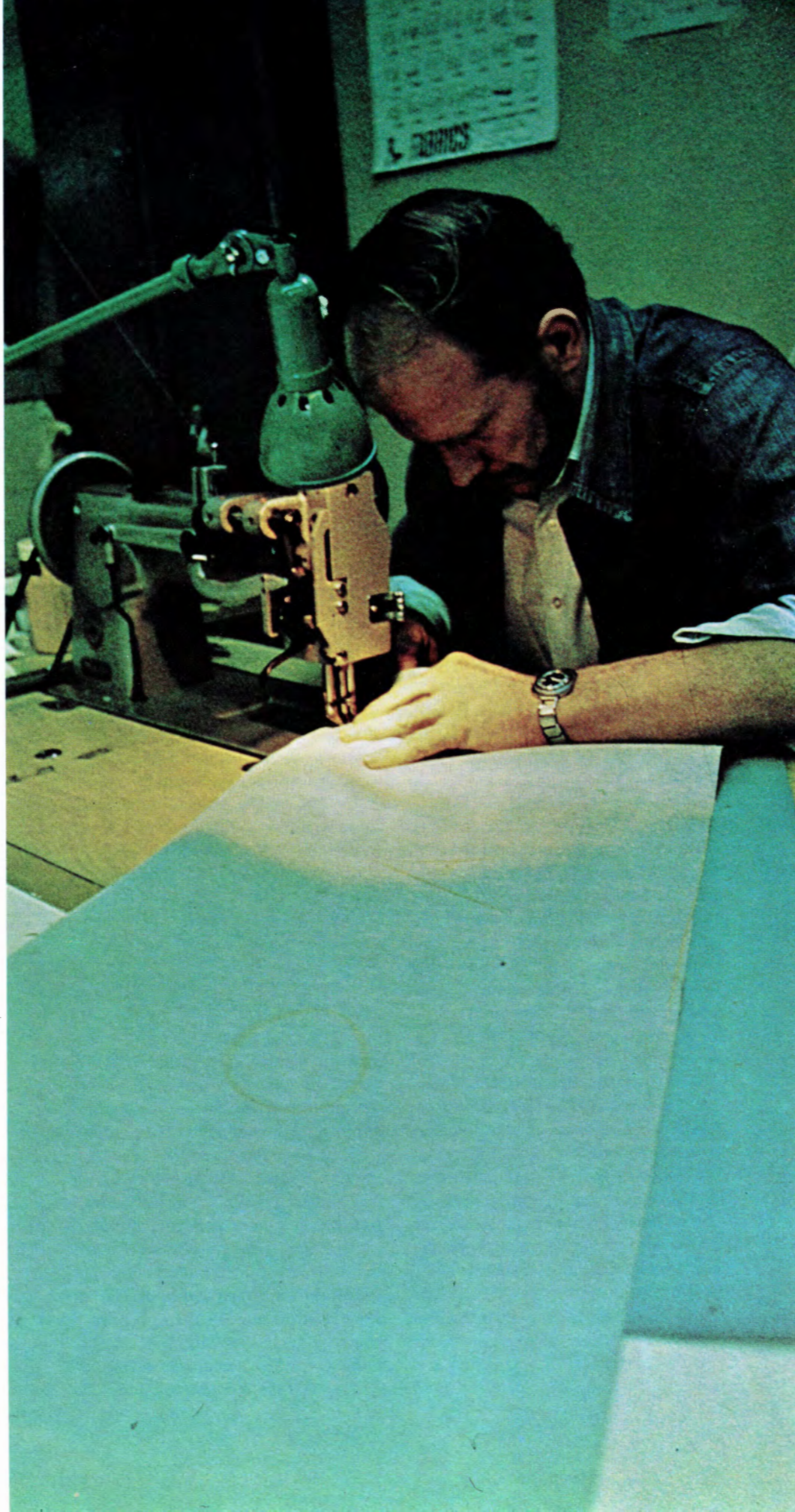
As most criminals view it today, crime is a sort of bizarre social game most everyone plays in one form or another — and with measured success. This underlying philosophy, strongly emphasized on TV, in the movies, and through the mass media, has convinced many that crime is just another part of "normal" life. As the thinking goes, only the unlucky and unfortunate get caught and go to prison.

Consequently, many inmates feel their incarceration is unjustified. Most feel victimized by a society filled with



WALLA WALLA'S SUCCESS STORY. "Residents" have formed "families" in which the members live in the same cell block and work together on the same jobs. At right, a member of the "Bridge family" works in the prison upholstery shop.

Prisoners enter exercise yard above: "Residents" have approximately three hours for exercise every day. The exercise yard is large enough to accommodate baseball, American football, and other sports.



individuals just as corrupt as they are. As one prisoner commented, "Society can't kid us. We know most crimes are never reported or solved. Practically everyone commits fairly serious crimes. Only we were the ones who got caught."

Crime statistics tend to back up such feelings. For instance, in the United States, police officials report that at least half of all crimes go unreported, and of those which are reported, police make an arrest in only one of five.

In addition, two billion dollars worth of merchandise is shoplifted annually, and some one billion dollars is embezzled by employees from their companies each year.

As a result, most inmates see their situation as merely bad luck in a society where "everybody else got away with it."

How can criminals be reformed as long as they remain convinced that crime is acceptable as long as you don't get caught?

Four: The "Graduate Schools of Crime"

The very nature of the prisons themselves is the fourth major cause for producing and hardening criminals. The grouping together of large numbers of criminal offenders behind prison walls actually intensifies the character flaws found in each man individually. For this reason, penal institutions are often referred to as "graduate schools" and "colleges" of crime.

Most inmates, for example, spend the better part of the day working at tasks such as cooking, making license plates and highway signs, and printing. But at night in their cellblocks, they are given ample opportunity to learn from other prisoners the "vocational skills" of armed robbery, kidnapping, stealing automobiles, picking locks, and so on.

By the time a man is ready for release from prison, he is usually more hostile, aggressive, and violent than when he went in. Many parolees leave

on a virtual round-trip ticket. The FBI recently reported that 65 percent of all U. S. prisoners are incarcerated again within five years of release.

The unnatural prison environment containing society's most dangerous men also makes the potential for inmate violence extremely high — and the potential is increasing. Ten years ago, one third of all U. S. prisoners were there for violent crimes against other persons. Today, the figure stands at one in two. Fully half of all inmates in U. S. prisons are there for the rape, robbery, assault, or murder of another human being. Is it any wonder prison riots are on the increase?

Sexual perversion among prisoners — male and female — is also rife. The degrading environment resulting from many individuals being enclosed apart from a normal family life makes the problem of homosexuality and lesbianism particularly acute. Some authorities estimate that homosexuality exists as a common occurrence among 20 to 50 percent of all male prisoners, and lesbianism runs as high as 80 percent among females.

By their very structure, prisons lump together some of society's most incorrigible criminals with recently convicted novices of crime. The resulting contact fosters newly formed criminal attitudes and behavior, therefore making the new offenders worse off.

What Prisons Can Do

For the prisons to succeed where society has failed, they must have the power to eliminate the four causes that go into producing and hardening criminals. In other words, they would have to have *the power to change vast segments of society and the very nature of man* — something no social institution has ever been able to achieve!

And yet, as the Washington State Penitentiary experiment demonstrates, prisons are capable of taking some definite steps in the right direction.

First of all, prison administrators
(Continued on page 46)



Prison Officials Caught in the Middle

AS INMATE hostility on the inside and public concern on the outside continue to mount, prison officials find themselves caught in the middle. To discuss the growing problem within their institutions, three U. S. West Coast prison officials granted the following exclusive interviews with the PLAIN TRUTH. Though interviewed separately, their answers to the same questions are grouped together.

QUESTION: To what do you attribute the current wave of prisoner unrest?

NELSON: I feel it is because of developments in our society. If we could get the turbulent problems of society smoothed over, I'm sure



Above: Louis S. Nelson —
Warden, San Quentin State Penitentiary
Left: Irving Marks —
Deputy Superintendent, California
Institution for Men
Below: Hoyt C. Cupp —
Superintendent, Oregon State Penitentiary
San Quentin
Watson — Plain Truth
Oregon State Penitentiary

prison problems would diminish. But, until we do, the prisons will continue to have disruptions.

MARKS: The man coming to prison today is the product of our modern age. The racial disorders that have occurred since the Watts riot have had a great impact on him. Outside frustrations like these, coupled with the dehumanized factors and internal frustrations inside, combine to produce explosive situations such as exist in prisons today.

Q. Do you feel that the prison system actually reinforces, rather than lessens, criminal behavior?

NELSON: In a sense, yes. But not in the sense most people mean it today. I say that for this reason. Today, we

get at our doorstep, with few exceptions, people who have been through all the schools of crime long before they came here. Never before, in all my life, have I seen such a bitter, vengeful, sophisticated group of prisoners as are coming to prison today. The “schools for crime” are out there in the streets where these people live, not primarily in the prisons.

CUPP: When we receive a hostile and aggressive young kid in here, there is no doubt that he is going to be exposed to more sophisticated criminal behavior than he has ever known. If his attitude is receptive to this, as it often is, he will definitely pick up criminal teaching of a “higher order.”

MARKS: Overall, I’d have to say that our prisons do reinforce criminal behavior. Most prisons are schools for crime — something none of us is proud of. I’ve talked to literally hundreds of men who told me that if they had not become “hooked” by the system after their first offense for which they were caught, they would not have ended up in prison.

Q. Do many prisoners feel that they were the unlucky ones who got caught while the rest of society “got away with it”?

NELSON: Yes, this has been a major problem ever since prisons were first instituted. Most of them feel that “everybody sins, but we got caught.” On the other hand, the inmates we used to get twenty years ago generally felt that what they had done wasn’t right. Many, in one sense, were glad that they got caught because it kept them from going on to bigger and more horrendous things. They at least felt a little compunction in wanting to do better. Then came along a new breed of prisoners schooled in the philosophy of the behavioral scientists — “Society is totally to blame, offenders have no guilt whatsoever.”

Today, many inmates have fallen prey to this kind of erroneous thinking. Most inmates are receptive to this kind of reasoning because it helps expiate their own guilt.

CUPP: I really think most prisoners feel that their incarceration is unfair. It is true that most people in jail are the unsuccessful criminals. Actually, we receive only a small percentage of those involved in the criminal pattern — the failures who got caught and convicted. This is one of the main reasons why I feel that the prisons will never really make a dent in America’s crime problem.

Q. What role does the family play in preventing crime and in establishing a successful rehabilitation program?

NELSON: It should go without saying that crime rates are much lower among those ethnic groups with strong family ties. But one of our biggest problems in rehabilitating these men is attempting to reestablish family ties which were unsatisfactory or nonexistent.

CUPP: As I see it, *the family holds the key* if we are ever going to stop crime in America. Most criminals here come from broken homes — psychologically or literally — with no communication, no warmth. As far as the family’s role in rehabilitation, I think it’s very important. The first couple of times a guy gets sent to jail, his family will usually stick with him. By the third or fourth time, they will begin to disown him, and pretty soon he is increasingly alienated from those links that would most serve to rehabilitate him — family and friends. The more he becomes involved in criminal behavior, the more he is shunned by his resources of stability and solidarity. If we are ever going to restore these men, we are going to have to reverse this cycle and get these men back into their family units.

(Continued from page 44)

and personnel must recognize that the key to rehabilitation lies *within* each inmate, not through external coercion. No matter how good the prison environment may be, reform is ultimately in the hands of the prisoner himself.

Rehabilitation is largely an individual matter — no one can be changed who doesn't want to be. A criminal who adamantly refuses to change his own attitude and lawless life-style cannot be forced to do so.

As Joe O'Brien, San Quentin's Information Officer, told me, "No prison ever reformed anybody. If a man decides to change, on his own, then you can help him along." In other words, better prison conditions — better facilities, personnel, and training — should be utilized as a means toward the end of helping inmates change, not as an end in itself.

One of the biggest handicaps to effecting reform is the general lack of wisdom among prisoners. Most convicts have never been taught how to think or act responsibly. Behind prison walls, the decision-making power is all but completely taken away from prisoners. One of the chief aims of any rehabilitation program should be teaching men how to be responsible and upright — to learn the difference between right and wrong.

Of course, inmates also need the type of work training and experience that will enable them to become economically self-sufficient on the outside upon release. Most offenders are sent to prison lacking any normal work experience. Many have never known what it means to support a family or themselves through steady employment. About 85 percent of all U. S. prisoners lack any marketable skill. Training parolees for jobs on the outside and getting them into steady employment would add immeasurably to lasting reform.

Finally, prisons can help successfully phase inmates back into their

families. Expanded conjugal visits and increasingly longer periods of stay at home is one way those about to be permanently released could be gradually placed back into stable family life.

What Prisoners Can Do

But we should all realize that the prisons can only do so much. As pointed out before, unless the prisoners themselves are willing to do their part, any attempts at lasting reform are bound to skid to a halt.

Prison inmates need to recognize something about themselves: that both external and internal forces pull them down the paths of crime. The external forces are due to outside circumstances in society such as the broken home, ghetto, poor education, poverty, etc. The internal forces are due to their own human nature that succumbed to these outside influences.

In other words, criminals need to own up to their own part in the crimes they have committed. Only by understanding this truth is real and lasting rehabilitation possible.

Those who desire to be reformed must understand what crime has done to them personally. Criminal attitudes and behavior, developed over a period of time, gnaw away at a man's mind, personality, and character just like cancer. Ultimately, crime ends up destroying a man's very life if he doesn't change (as is usually the case).

Among our several million readers are a few thousand prisoners. If you are one of these prisoners who subscribe to *The PLAIN TRUTH*, you need to realize that *it need not be too late for you*.

There exists a way in which true and permanent reform is possible. It is a process in which your entire mind, character, and conscience can be cleaned up and forever rid of guilt — a way in which peace of mind, satisfaction, accomplishment, and happiness are readily available — *but only if you are willing to completely change*.

Such a change means more than merely feeling sorry for the deeds you have committed. Not that you shouldn't feel sorry for them, but that *and more*. You should also become sick of what crime has done to yourself and others. You should determine to face the future never wanting to commit another crime ever again. You should determine to avoid even attitudes that could eventually lead to crime.

Actually, this message applies not only to prisoners but also *to society* as a whole. For all stand guilty of sin before God until forgiven!

True Rehabilitation

If you have come to see the need for this kind of lasting change in your life, you need to begin studying the pages of the Book which is the foundation of true rehabilitation — the Holy Bible.

The Bible is the key not only to prisoner reform but to a needed total change in everyone. It reveals an all-powerful, loving, merciful God who fully understands your own particular weaknesses. Understand that this God — the true God — stands ready to forgive and forget as soon as you are willing to change your way of thinking and your way of life.

In the Bible, this change is called *repentance*. One repents of sin. What is sin? "Sin is the transgression of the law" — God's law (I John 3:4). Crime is, by definition, the transgression of man's law. Sin brings a penalty that must be paid. Either you pay that penalty — eternal death (Romans 6:23) — or someone must pay it in your stead. Jesus Christ willingly paid the full penalty for all crimes and all sins you and everyone else have ever committed.

If you would like a detailed explanation of this rehabilitation process — right out of the pages of your Bible — write for our free booklet, *What Is Faith?* and the reprint article entitled "What Is Real Repentance?" For address, see inside front cover. □