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Crime and Punishment / Last chance for those behind bars -- education

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I was once a preschool teacher. For a year, I spent the majority of my waking hours with 3- and 4-year-olds in a federally funded [Head Start center](#) in the South Bronx. Like all children their age, they had limitless energy; I can still picture them making up their own unique movements when it was dance time and clamoring to be let out to the playground on snowy days.

But in many ways, the children in my classroom -- all black or Latino -- were not your average preschoolers. They lived in the nation's poorest congressional district: a dejected, time-battered concrete expanse of New York City with high levels of asthma and debilitating poverty, pockmarked with empty lots and towering housing projects. The first week of school, when we sat in a circle to talk about science, the majority of the kids did not know what a leaf was, calling it "a flower" or "grass" instead.

Understandably, it was the children with the most difficult lives who most clearly ingrained themselves in my memory. Seven years later, I still often choke up at the thought of them. One boy, whom teachers were forced to subdue physically at times because of his aggression, talked about throwing himself in front of a subway train, before turning angrily toward me and spitting in my face. Other kids lived with parents who were violent or addicted to drugs. Some had behavior problems so severe that it was painfully clear that they would be relegated to a life of special-[education](#) classes, if they were lucky, and would never receive anything near the care or help that they needed.

Then there was Kevin. At 3 years old, small and wiry with a winning smile, Kevin bore the trademarks of having been born addicted to drugs. He was alternately outgoing and loving, then aggressive and hysterical. Kevin was a child so confused that if he hugged his classmates, he might turn around two seconds later and smack them. We teachers spent hours talking about Kevin in staff meetings and turned to psychologists for tips on how to rein him in, but the struggle never really ended.

Last month, I was part of a small class of students from UC Berkeley's [Graduate School of Journalism](#) who made a trip to San Quentin State Prison to see penitentiary life from the inside. But the whole time I was there I couldn't stop thinking about all the Kevins I once tried to teach, and the many times my colleagues and I fretted about the prison that, we feared, they were likely headed for.

San Quentin was certainly the human warehouse of my worst fears. Human beings stacked five rows high, jammed into claustrophobic double-occupancy cells, a dining hall that reeked of urine, inmates who looked as if the world had chewed them up and spit them out. They were beyond hardened. They were frightening. But still human. We can blame the inmates for ending up there, but on whom do we pin the blame when released inmates are incapable of functioning in society? Within three years, the state's corrections department reports, 59 percent of California parolees will return to prison.

Obscene amounts of money are poured into incarceration: the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation spends \$33,581 on each of 166,295 inmates per year, compared with the \$6,919 per year that, according to the state's education department, is needed to educate a K-12 student. (The California teachers I know buy materials for their students out of their own pocketbooks.) The costs are continuing to rise: Over the past 25 years, the statewide rate of new incarcerations has increased sevenfold, reports the corrections department. But once the inmates leave prison, are we unleashing an even worse force onto society? In order to protect ourselves, don't we also have a responsibility to help fix these people, whether their destruction came at their own hands, or from the ravages of drugs or violent families?

More than anything, I think we have a responsibility to educate inmates -- educate them to respect their society, others around them and their own futures. Many of them rejected education a long time ago, or were ill-served by the educational system. The average inmate in California is 36, yet reads at a seventh-grade level, corrections department data show. Nationwide, according to the federal [Government Accountability Office](#), 71 percent of inmates are high-school dropouts. The [National Institute for Literacy](#) estimates that as many as half of the country's inmates have learning disabilities.

Just as prisoners need education, they should also be guaranteed adequate mental-health care and drug-treatment services. Drug use and sales, according to the guards I spoke with, are rampant inside San Quentin, which points to the fact that the few existing addiction services -- other than outside agencies that hold support groups -- are not fulfilling their mandate. The mentally ill, who would be better served in a medical setting, have ended up in prison in striking numbers over the past three decades after the state closed the majority of its mental hospitals.

Our best chance to break the cycles of poverty, violence and incarceration is education. With quality education, prisoners will not be cleansed of their sins, but they will gain the practical skills necessary to hold down jobs, be effective parents and rejoin society. I do not disagree that people who commit crimes should be punished. I cannot fathom what could push someone to murder, rape or inflict harm upon another human being. I fear those who are capable of that. But before I allow myself to fear them without question, I try to remember that there are at least a couple of Kevins out there: people born without a chance in life.