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## On the Use of Media to Create Systemic Changes in the U.S. Prison System By Daniel Labbe

There is no question that the prison system in the United States is deeply flawed. The practice of human warehousing and extreme sentencing must stop. It has no positive, rehabilitative effect on inmates thus endangering the communities they return to when released. It is now clear that sending the portion of our society that suffers the most challenges (socio-economic disadvantages, mental illness, poor family support) to prisons for long periods of time without providing the education and support they need to heal and learn how to lead productive lives is the practice of an ignorant and emotionally disturbed mind-set.

We now have vast amounts of knowledge in the fields of neuroscience, psychology, and sociology to create a justice system that is humane, rehabilitative, and fair. In light of this knowledge the very idea of punishment and human warehousing as a useful means to obtain justice for the victims of crime and to maintain social order is absurd. Such an approach is an embarrassment to 21<sup>st</sup> century Western civilization.

So how do we change this mind-set so we can create a more effective and humane justice system? I would like to suggest that those who are interested in creating such ~~change~~ systemic changes in the prison system focus on curing the root of the problem rather than frantically trying

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to treat the myriad of symptoms plaguing the system, a focus on symptoms will keep you running in circles while new symptoms keep replacing the ones you just treated.

So what exactly is the root of the problem? Gandhi asked himself this same question when pondering the gigantic challenges he faced in India. One answer he came up with was Public Opinion. He realized he needed to persuade both the Indian and the British public, and he used the available media at the time (newspapers) to promote his ideas, lead the Indians, and give the British a new perspective on the Indians. This was Gandhi's most powerful tool, and it worked so well that he was able to bring the world's most powerful empire to its knees.

I believe that using today's media resources to inform the public, and give them a more accurate opinion of the prison system and those it incarcerates would be the most powerful way to create systemic changes in the criminal justice system.

When you think about it, prisons are built and run by politicians and lobbyists. These are the people responsible for creating sentencing laws and deciding whether or not to promote rehabilitative programs. If we want to change the prison system we need politicians and lobbyists to want to change the system. For this to take place we ~~do~~ will need the voting public and those who ~~have~~ financially back the politicians to want to change the system. Once voters and those who financially support politicians want prisons and the criminal justice system to change in

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America then the Politicians will "magically" fake a serious interest. Once this happens, reform will be the natural result.

If our goal is to create true systemic changes in the system we need to gain public support for that change.

As it is, public opinion of the men and women who live in our prisons is decidedly negative. We are seen as less than human. There is little compassion for inmates because of the widespread <sup>belief</sup> that people who end up in prison do so because they are "bad". There is something fundamentally wrong with us; we are "evil," and we get what we deserve.

Such an opinion allows the public to separate us and to remain apathetic about what happens in our prisons; after all, we are less than human.

Any effort to change the system without changing public opinion will be impotent and doomed for failure. The best such an attempt can hope for is to try to manage the worst symptoms of an outdated and diseased justice system.

We can't blame the public for their sentiments. They only have a few sources of information to form their opinions with - mainly television news programs and newspapers. The very nature of such media is to report on crimes, re-offenders, violence, scams, and whatever will grab attention. How often have you seen a news story on an ex-con who has gotten his life together and is now a productive citizen? With such biased information the public has little hope of gaining an accurate perspective.

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I believe we need to make a more well-rounded source of information regarding the Prison system and those involved with it available to the Public. I suggest the creation of an online ~~website~~ newsletter that features a variety of information such as:

- Feature articles on those who have been released from Prison or still live in Prison and are leading inspirational lives.
- Articles on inmates who face extraordinary challenges such as mental health issues and abusive or dysfunctional backgrounds, and show how they are struggling to change their lives for the better in a system that offers them little or no support.
- Articles on the most common abuses found in the Prison System such as ~~no~~ criminally poor health care, staff abuse on inmates, no access to a healthy diet, poor conditions, etc.
- Slice of life articles that humanize the Prison Population.
- And articles on programs that are effective as well as on Prison systems in other countries (ie Northern European countries) that have good results.

Such a newsletter would be a powerful tool in changing public opinion. This newsletter could come out every two months and be aggressively promoted to make sure it reaches the widest audience. This way the Public can see how we treat our inmates and how such poor treatment negatively affects them. We, prisoners, could then be

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humanized in the Public's eyes, once this happens making Progressive, systemic changes will only be natural.

Obviously, this is not a quick fix, but with the popularity of the internet and Strategic advertising there is no reason why this approach wouldn't show measurable results in Public sentiment within a couple of years.

Gandhi used the printed word to reclaim India in an effort that spanned over twenty years. A small group of people used social media to create the Arab Spring nearly overnight. Maybe we can find a middle ground that will revolutionize the American justice system within the next ten years.

Once we gain the Public's support we must be prepared to make the best use of it. Effective programs, a more enlightened and humane approach, and reasonable sentences are a must, and with an accurately informed ~~society~~ and sympathetic society on our side there is no limits to what we can accomplish.