

PROOF OF FAILURE
MASSACHUSETTS PRISON NIGHTMARE

by Timothy J. Muise

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How does one prove that any entity is a failure? Well in our culture different entities have their own sets of criteria which are applied in order to determine if they are successful or not. For many businesses it would be "the bottom" line: how much of a profit are they making. For a school system it would be the graduation rate. Well in corrections the "gold standard" for how the system is working is the recidivism rate. How many people are coming back to prison after a previous stay there. There is another layer to this recidivism test, that being: How much are you spending on this system? Results and costs.

Massachusetts has a unique dynamic. We have a relatively small prison system and a fairly high generation of tax revenues. What does this mean? It means that our commonwealth has much more money to spend on its prison system than let's say an Alabama or Mississippi. You would think that is an asset in the quest for effective corrections, but here in Massachusetts is has proven to be a detriment. We pay big bucks for a system that reaps one of the highest recidivism rates..We have proven failure.

The Massachusetts Department of Correction has about 5500 employees who oversee approximately 11,350 prisoners. The staffing ratio works out to about 2.2 prisoners for each staff member. Alabama has a ratio of about 12 to 1 and Mississippi about 15 to 1. The taxpayers here in the commonwealth foot a yearly bill of approximately \$520,000,000.00 (and this does take into consideration the employees who retire and continue to receive pay and benefits - the actual yearly cost of corrections is closer to one BILLION dollars if you figure in all the costs) and 68% of that yearly budgeted figure goes to staff salary: approximately \$364,000,000.00. The bottom line with all these staffing ratios and costs is what do they produce? How is this immense investment paying off for Massachusetts? The answer: not too good.

Latest statistics show that the mean recidivism rate in Massachusetts is about 43%. That means that almost one in two return to prison after about three years post release. When you break the rates down even

further by certain demographics it becomes even clearer that modern corrections has it all wrong as far as public safety is concerned. In 2007 Massachusetts released 158 prisoners directly from maximum security, where the most dangerous prisoners are held. Of that 158 prisoners 97 returned within the three year time frame, many for even more violent offenses. That equals a 62% recidivism rate and I cannot even fathom what the social impact of those newest crimes committed by those recidivists may be. That same year 835 prisoners were released from minimum security. Of that figure 289 came back to prison within three years. That 34% recidivism rate means that one in three prisoners released from even minimum security came back on the heels of other crimes.

What does all that mean? It means that what we are doing here in this fine state is not working. The Massachusetts Department of Correction has become nothing but a jobs program. Our guards here are the third highest paid in the nation, and have one of the best benefit and internal policy packages. Did you know that a state guard can "swap" shifts with other guards so that he can work his 40 hour week in 3 days? (two double shifts and one regular shift) What this does is make for tired guards who do not feel like doing their jobs. This poor job performance impacts recidivism in a negative manner. We have coddled these guards to the point where they seek to stay home and get paid. We have lost the focus on public safety. Prison has become a true scam.

There is almost no real job training anymore in the prison system. The reentry services in prison are laughable and do not have any type of connection to halfway houses, residential programs, or sober living homes. In most cases the prisoner has to reach out to these programs themselves. The money spent on staffing is over-the-top. There is no need for the current staffing levels. You have 5 sergeants doing what one used to do. There are so many layers of Captains, Lieutenants, and sergeants that the actual line guard is a rare beast. Over-classification of prisoners also plays a large role in this equation. The sad story here is that the Massachusetts prison system does almost

nothing to prepare prisoners in its charge to reenter society: and this is a violation of the law as here in Massachusetts there exists a rehabilitation mandate. The public has been disserved for far too long as far as public safety is concerned and the department of correction must be fully refigured and overhauled with the focus being placed upon rehabilitation and proven success. Anyone not on board walks the plank.

This proof of failure detailed herein does not just have public safety ramifications. The erosion of the social fabric and dismantling of the family unit that mass incarceration breeds negatively impacts whole generations. The tough on crime rhetoric sounded good but has proven sure folly. Crime flourishes and hope plummets while pundits speak of building prisons and having prisoners break rocks. This misguided philosophy has destined more youth to the modern American gulag while channeling much needed human resource funds away from the humanitarian mission and flushing them down the toilet of the new jobs program that is the prison industrial complex. The time has come for us a society to demand a reevaluation of this failed system and aggressively seek to put rehabilitation and social healing at the heart of the corrections equation.

Fedor Dostoevsky once wrote, "You can judge the level of any civilization by how it treats its prisoners.", and I offer that his words were on target. Until we get back to our core value system, a system of redemption and second chances, we are only doomed to continue to spiral down into the abyss of moral decay. Please do not let modern Nero's fiddle while our beloved Rome burns. The time has come to demand effective prison reform.

Timothy J. Muise is a prisoner rights activist who is serving an 18-20 prison term for manslaughter in the Massachusetts state prison system. Tim is co-founder of CURE-ARM and you can find out more about his work at: <https://www.facebook.com/curearminc> as well as at: <http://betweenthebars.org/blogs/101/>