

## THE REASON FOR SUCH HIGH RECIDIVISM RATES

Sunday

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Recidivism rates in America are unusually high: over 70%. This means that **at least** 70 out of every 100 people released from prison will find themselves right back where they started, and in less than 5-years. It's been this way for so long that we don't even question it anymore. We just take it as true that, no matter what we do, more than 70% of the people released from prison are going to end up back inside, and, as a society, we act accordingly. These beliefs are used to deny employment to ex-convicts, just as landlords refuse to rent to them. Even the government's gotten into the act, refusing to provide public assistance to an increasing number of criminal offenses. Any one of these could be the deciding factor in an ex-con's success, but together, they exponentially increase his odds of failure, until failure's all but guaranteed.

Inmates preparing to reenter society know the odds are stacked against them long before the gates begin to open, and yet, somehow, we allow our optimism to get the best of us. As our time draws to a close, we begin to make plans for a life in the outside world, plans that don't even contemplate the odds of failure. For the most part, we all believe that, despite overwhelming odds, we'll be able to make it into that magical category, that 20 to 30 percent of people that somehow manage to defy the odds. Sadly, most end up having their hopes and dreams crushed, slowly at first, and then with ever increasing speed, as they reemerge into society, confronted with distrust, skepticism, even outright hatred from people who know nothing more about us than our committing offense, if that. And yet we continue to try, to give it our best, hoping beyond hope that we can somehow prevail.

I don't know of any way to alter a society's preconceived notion, which is probably for the best. Technology like that would be sure to keep everyone up at night, fearful of how an individual might be using it, or worse, our own government, but while I can't change a society's preconceived notions, I should be able to take whatever actions I deem necessary to ensure my success upon my release. After all, I'm the one who's going to have to live with the consequences, good or bad, so shouldn't I have a say in how I prepare myself? Unfortunately, California, like so many other states throughout the land, takes an opposing view. While they're perfectly content to allow me to participate in meaningless groups with my fellow inmates, groups that sound good on paper, groups with names like "Victim Impact" or "Anger Management," at the end of the day, that's about the only meaningful act they'll allow.

While each and every individual in prison has their own unique story, their own individual reasons for having failed, without exception, we all share the same three core concepts for a successful reentry: (1) preparation, (2) preparation and (3) preparation. Every task we set out to complete, no matter how trivial or how daunting, is in some way, shape or form related to preparing ourselves for a successful reentry into a society who, rightfully or not, has already given up hope on us. This isn't an excuse for failure, nor does it make the task impossible, just more challenging, but at the same time, it also makes the sweet taste of success all that much sweeter.

To those unfamiliar with how the prison system really operates, the obvious question is: "if you know that proper preparation is so important, then why aren't you using your lengthy prison sentence to properly prepare for a life outside the prison environment?" To that, I say "if it were only that easy..."

There are a number of problems with properly preparing oneself for reentering society from a prison environment. First and foremost is the complete ignorance surrounding one's future plans. Release dates are subject to change, at any moment in time, and for any reason. Some can be planned for, such as earning additional time off for good conduct, but more often than not, the changes which occur happen at the last minute, and impact the hopeful parolee in an extremely negative way. For instance, I recently seen one of the guys in here go through all sorts of changes, getting himself ready to be released. He'd literally written hundreds of letters trying to find a place to stay, contacted all kinds of different organizations in an attempt to secure transportation from the bus to his final destination, he even managed to convince someone to donate some clothing for him to wear out of here. At the last moment, the prison comes to him to tell him that he has to do another 8-months, due to a miscalculation on their part, completely blowing all of his hard work and plans. To say he was upset would be an understatement, but he handled it well, and set out on another letter writing campaign, only to find that those who were previously willing to help him were now feeling frustrated and fed up with the whole thing. All of that work, and nothing to show for it.

I've seen others undergo similar changes, securing everything from a place to stay to employment, long before being released, only to be told, literally at the last minute, that they're not going to be allowed to parole to that location because their victim doesn't feel comfortable with them living or working so close. Forget about the fact that the hopeful parolee was born and raised in this area, or that all of his family and friends, people critical to his support, also live there. In this, the prison system, which includes the parole department, is judge, jury and executioner, and the hopeful parolee's plans are changed at the last minute in an attempt to appease the former victim. Rather than allowing him to parole to a place with a roof over his head and a job waiting for him, a place of safety for all concerned, he's instead sent to a new location, forced to live on the streets. With last minute changes like this, it's no wonder the recidivism rate is so high!

Since an inmate often has no way of knowing where he's going to be allowed to parole until the time he's actually released, he's often unable to do anything to prepare the community for his arrival until it's too late. As a result, instead of being released to friends and family who care about what happens to him, a place where he has gainful employment waiting, etc., he's thrust into a harsh, uncaring environment with barely enough left to get a meal at a fast food restaurant, let alone shelter for the night. Knowing this might happen, those most interested in success struggle to take advantage of whatever educational opportunities available to them while in-custody. Unfortunately, these opportunities are usually few and far between, with most of them being worth next to nothing in the real world. As with anything, there are always exceptions to every rule, such as a high school drop out earning his GED, but what then? Can that same drop out continue on to college, to earn a degree in a career that actually interests him? A career he can actually apply himself to upon his release?

Educational opportunities, **meaningful** educational opportunities, are defined as those opportunities which interest the hopeful parolee, not only because it's something the hopeful parolee has an interest in learning, but because the hopeful parolee knows this is something he can take, and more importantly apply, upon his release. For example, why provide classes in psychology, when you know your students will never, ever be able to complete the 7+ years of educational requirements needed to pass, let alone the on-the-job training, and even then, who could never, ever hope to be granted a license to practice as a psychologist due to their criminal background. Yet, these are the types of basic courses offered throughout most prisons throughout the US, not because the prison has any real hopes of seeing their students complete, let alone pass, such a rigorous, and prolonged, schedule, but because this allows the prison to look good on paper (look at what we're trying to teach these guys!!), while at the same time, not actually teaching inmates anything they could actually use to gain meaningful employment.

This isn't to say there aren't **any** meaningful courses offered in prison, because there are, but you can bet that, when offered, they benefit the prison administration far more than they do the hopeful parolee, and even then, waiting lists have been known to be measured by years, decades even, not months. What you'll rarely see, if ever, are courses that both appeal to a hopeful parolee's personal taste and his choice of career, and you're certainly not going to see many courses offered which might provide any sort of chance to meaningfully provide for him and his family, let alone a chance to make it out of poverty.

Ask any inmate what he needs to be doing to increase his chances for success, and they'll all tell you the same thing: allow me an education in something that actually interests me, something I want to actually do for the rest of my life, and allow me to actually prepare for my release, by saving up money the prison can't take every time we turn around, and we'll make it, every single time. But this, as those of us in here already know, doesn't serve the prison's bottom line. There are simply too many people who make far too much money off of locking us up to take a serious interest in seeing the recidivism rate drop. Corruption runs rampant in the prison system, with every Tom, Dick and Harry dealing with the system making more money than they can count. To implement any sort of plan which might actually result in success would mean a decrease in the number of people incarcerated, which in turn means fewer opportunities for these companies to make a profit.

As if it wasn't difficult enough to prepare oneself for eventual release, now the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) has decided to further restrict the opportunities available. Once upon a time, inmates used to be able to take classes designed to teach the student how to do everything from use Microsoft Word, Excel and even Access, but first Access was removed from the course, and soon, when they finally install Microsoft Office 2010, they're also going to remove the ability to use macros and VBA. It's a little thing, to be sure, but it represents a desire on the part of the CDCR to provide as little in the way of meaningful educational opportunities to their captive audience as possible. It's no wonder that, when an inmate is finally released back into society, he does so with the knowledge that not only does he have the stigma of a felony conviction on his record, for the rest of his natural life, but that even the youngest employee, working through Christmas vacation, knows far more about the software utilized by their employer than the oldest parolee.

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