TRUTH v. PERCEPTION

Are Individuals Who Have Committed A Crime Forever Dangerous?

It seems like every time I hear anything about justice reform or any proposed change in the law to address the overcrowded prison system, the opposition starts their outcry: "They are trying to let dangerous criminals go free!" or "They are putting the public at risk". Is this true? Would letting individuals out of prison who have served decades really endanger anyone? A new research study may provide some answers to these questions.

A recently published study in the journal "Criminology" titled: "Criminal history's expiration date: Evidence of prediction decay" (September 19, 2026), has some very interesting findings. The study analyzed 40 years of criminal charge data across five states covering 16,594,838 individuals (yes...that is over 16 million people).

The study found:

*The predictive value of a prior criminal event declines proportionally with each passing year, with the steepest drops occurring in the initial years.

*Recidivism risk converges with the baseline risk rate of the general population within 9 to 10 years.

*The exponential decay pattern holds true across different geographic locations, demographic groups, offense types, incarceration backgrounds, and historical periods.

The study went on to say: These findings provide a great framework for accessing criminal history and challenge the reliance on old static indicators that may overstate reoffending risk.

This study will hopefully help explain how individual traits, social bonds and life events shape individuals risk for reoffending. It found a common pattern: crime peaks in adolescence and declines steadily with age.

While this study could be a very useful tool in shaping justice reform, I am fearful it will not have any impact on policy or laws because our society often clings to a perception rather than a truth. As a simple example, ask anyone this question: If you place a cup of boiling water in the freezer and a cup of ice cold water in the freezer, which one will freeze first? Of course the correct answer is the boiling water would freeze first but many will refuse to accept this truth because they are blinded by their preconceived perceptions and do not understand how this could be true. The same denial of truth is often applied to how society views individuals who have committed a crime. Most are blinded by preconceived notions and emotional reactions and will not accept anything which may challenge their beliefs.

This study makes me ponder these questions:

If individuals who have committed a crime 10 or more years ago are no more likely than the general population to commit another crime, then why is society so fearful of anything that would give these individuals an opportunity to return to society and be a productive member? Why do we sentence individuals to decades and in some cases even centuries in prison with absolutely no way to ever return to society? Is it Justice or Vengeance?

If you would like to read this study for yourself, you can access the full research paper through the Wiley Online Library or learn more about the research via the University of Nebraska Omaha News.

Please share your thoughts with me.

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