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English Composition Research Paper

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### Choose Rehabilitation Over Punishment

How would you feel if you were face to face with a murderer who had multiple knives hanging behind him? Obviously here in America that sounds insane. Why would we allow a prisoner who is in jail for murder be around knives, let alone hold a knife. But in Norway that's not out of the ordinary. They focus on rehabilitation rather than punishment. They treat their prisoners almost as if they were still living in the outside world. And I get it, you're probably thinking "well they chose that life behind bars, being treated the way they do when they decided to break the law." But maybe that's one of our main problems here in America. Why are we quick to change our minds about how we treat humans just because they did a wrong, no matter the extreme. I'm not saying we need to treat our prisoners like they're on vacation. To me being taken away from your family and society is enough punishment. The American prison system should follow Norway's prison model because it will reduce the recidivism rate, and create a safer environment for the prisoners themselves, the guards and the society they walk into when and if they eventually get out of prison.

First let's focus on how it will create a safer environment. In the documentary *Where To Invade Next* Michael Moore's first sentence is very powerful when talking about invading Norway. He says "[w]elcome to the Norwegian prison system, based on the principle of

rehabilitation, not revenge”. This speaks a lot because our society alone is mainly about revenge. There was a man in this documentary, Trond Blattmann, whose son was murdered. Michael Moore asked this man if he wanted to go and kill the man that murdered his son. Blattman said he would not want to kill the man that killed his son, even if he had the chance. “I don’t want to step down on the ladder and say I had the same right as you thought you had to kill” (Blattman). This to me completely relates to my main point. So because these people in our prison systems did a wrong that gives us a right to go against what we as a country stand for and treat them inhumanely? We need to think about the bigger picture.

“Anthony C. Graves endured 18 years in solitary confinement while awaiting execution for murders he was later exonerated of committing” (CQ press). Graves said “I would watch guys come to prison totally sane and in three years they don’t live in the real world anymore.” Just think about that for a minute. How is that in any way safe or okay? People should come to prison and be rehabilitated so that when they leave they don’t end up back in jail. Not be punished so much that they don’t even live in the real world anymore when they leave. So what can we do to make people leave prison better than they were when they came in?

One way could be changing who we put into our prisons and what we actually do to our prisoners. Did you know we’ve been throwing mentally ill people in prisons just because we don’t have anywhere else to put them (CQ Press. “While some committed violent crimes and remain a threat to themselves and others, many are incarcerated for minor offenses simply because there is nowhere else to put them” (CQ Press). So instead of us helping these people who desperately need our help we’re throwing them into jail and putting them into solitary confinement for behaviors they can’t even control. And how is that safe for anybody? It’s

definitely not safe for that mentally ill inmate themselves because solitary confinement is only enhancing their illness and making it worse. But it also only creates an unsafe environment for the prisoners around them. And eventually that would create an unsafe society if that inmate ever even makes it back into the real world. We need to get these people the help they need for starters. The ones with minor offenses should definitely not just be thrown into prison because we don't have anywhere else to put them. But we also need to get the mentally ill prisoners with the larger offenses the help they need.

One case involving a mentally ill patient being thrown into solitary confinement is Kevin DeMott, who was diagnosed with bipolar disorder when he was only 11 years old (Glazer). Glazer stated Kevin was shackled in his cell with a helmet on his head to protect him against his head banging against the wall. Kevin's mother said "the prison kept him in solitary confinement for four months to punish him for behaviors stemming from his bipolar disorder and did not treat his illness".

"Over the past forty years, American prisons have increasingly relied on a brutal method of confinement that inflicts severe suffering on prisoners" (The Psychology of Cruelty). They continued on to say "Walking past these inmates, one can observe babbling, shrieking, and the banging of prisoners' bodies against the walls of their cells. There is no dispute that this method of confinement has a terrible effect on prisoners' well-being, and yet because it inflicts mental harm, rather than physical harm, courts have largely turned a blind eye."

While we focus so much on punishing these prisoners we're creating more dangerous, unsafe, environments. We need to open our eyes and realize our methods aren't working. In the documentary *Where to Invade Next* they show you two different prisons. They have their

maximum security prison and then there model prison, which is for the prisoners who are on good behavior. In the documentary Moore is first in the maximum security facility and he talks to a prisoner about fighting in the prison. The prisoner told Moore he's never been in a fight, never been harmed in prison. They have their own showers, rooms etc. Every story I personally hear about American prisons are always violent and scary.

Also in the documentary Moore decided to talk to some of the guards. The Norwegian guards don't carry guns. They said "we talk to the guys, that's our weapon." They also said "when it comes to do the job, they will do it good, you know, because the officers, they serve you, you know, they're there for you." And that's what American prisons need. They need to care for the prisoners and be there to help them, not harm them and treat them unfairly. If we started showing our prisoners more love and compassion our guards wouldn't need guns as a solution for protection because the environment would become a safer place.

So now that we talked about how following Norway's prison system will create a safer environment let's talk about how it will reduce the recidivism rate in America. By definition recidivism is the tendency of a convicted criminal to reoffend.

"Overall, 67.8% of the 404,638 state prisoners released in 2005 in 30 states were arrested within 3 years of release, and 76.6% were arrested within 5 years of release (figure 1). Among prisoners released in 2005 in 23 states with available data on inmates returned to prison, 49.7% had either a parole or probation violation or an arrest for a new offense within 3 years that led to imprisonment, and 55.1% had a parole or probation violation or an arrest that led to imprisonment within 5 years" (Durose, Cooper, Snyder).

“Norway’s humane approach towards prisoners seems effective: only 20% [of] prisoners are reconvicted within two years, almost half the rate of many US states, even though only hard cases—which are more likely to offend—are incarcerated to begin with” (Richards). So why is Norway’s recidivism rate so much lower than America’s recidivism rate? When I read this I look at her definition of humane as having or showing compassion or benevolence. We need to stop focusing so much on the punishing aspect and start focusing on the rehabilitation for these prisoners.

“After Norwegian prisoners have served time in a regular prison and proved their wish to reform to the authorities, they may apply to be transferred to Bastoy. Whereas inmates in other facilities are heavily policed and have little freedom over their actions, in Bastoy the prisoners themselves maintain the island. The prison’s focus is on teaching responsibility and creating “good neighbours”, so that once inmates are released, they can move on from their criminal history and contribute to society” (Richards). This is something we should definitely be doing. These prisoners in America are being taken away from society as a whole, not given any of these feelings of freedom, and then thrown back into society and are expected to just be able to go about everything like they never left. They don’t know enough about society when they’re in our American prisons except the life they lived before going in there, and their life before prison is what lead them to prison in the first place.

“At Bastoy, the main aim is effective rehabilitation of prisoners. Access to academic and vocational courses gives prisoners skills for employment, and they are even allowed to start working outside 18 months before release, to make the transition back to the outside world as smooth as possible. Cognitive behavioural therapy and counselling services are also widely

available, improving prisoners' mental health" (Richards). This is so important as well.

American prisons need to start focusing on what the life after prison is going to be for these prisoners. They need help to get back on their feet so they aren't in the same state they were in when they committed the crime that led them to prison.

So the main things American prison systems need to start changing are 1) showing more love and compassion to our prisoners to create a safer environment and 2) focusing on rehabilitation that will lead to a lower recidivism rate. Yes I agree, someone who has committed a crime should be punished, and taking them away from society, their families and friends etc is punishment enough. I don't believe they should be treated as if they're on vacation, but there needs to be changes made to our systems. I think we should all look at it as if it was our parent, child, friend etc in prison being treated this way. Would we want them to be treated inhumanely or would we want them to be treated as the humans they are? If we open our eyes and choose to follow Norway's prison system not only will we be making our prisoners and guards safer, we will be making our environments everywhere safer and improving our society as a whole by reducing the recidivism rate.

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