

Rehabilitative Justice: What the US can learn from the Norwegian Model

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The US imprisons more people per capita than any other country in the world, at a rate of 700 per 100,000. Consider the just 66 per 100,000 in Norway, whose prison model is rehabilitative in nature, and the difference is stark. Indeed, the differences in incarcerated populations can be tied back to the rehabilitation efforts (and lack thereof) of the two carceral systems. For example, in California, when an inmate from prison is released, they receive a measly “gateway sum” of a maximum of \$200, which is completely insufficient for living necessities, let alone the technology or professional attire one needs to get a decent job. However, in Norway, released inmates get significant assistance with reintegration; active labor market programs help with job searching and formerly incarcerated individuals get access to a variety of social support services including housing, social assistance, and disability insurance. California’s system will inevitably cause higher recidivism rates because formerly incarcerated people have no choice but to resort to larceny to survive, relapse into drug use because of deteriorating mental health, or any number of other suboptimal paths. As expected, more than half of America’s release inmates are reincarcerated within three years of their release.

Why, then, do so many Americans support the status quo carceral institution? The most common argument is that rehabilitative prisons cost too much. However, empirical evidence shows that rehabilitative prisons are far more cost-effective than punitive ones. In one of the UK’s deferred prosecution schemes ‘Operation Checkpoint’,

the estimated benefit to society from reduced re-offending was 2 million pounds against a cost of only half a million for running the program. Similar patterns hold true in Norway. While the Norwegian prison system spends two to four times more than the US per person, there is less recidivism and crime which results in an overall reduction in criminal justice expenditure and reduction in victimization costs. Moreover, helping formerly incarcerated people find jobs results in a higher income through taxes for the government and lower transfer payments. Finally, reforming prison sentencing in the US to model those in Norway would help solve prison overcrowding by decreasing prison populations and the length of sentencing. Prison overcrowding has been deemed to cause “an unconscionable degree of suffering” by the US Supreme Court and will also easily free up funds to invest in prison reform. Obviously, then, this argument falls flat.

Secondly, people push back on the comparison made between Norway and the United States, saying they have extremely different social values and institutions. Nevertheless, Norway and the US have fairly similar prisoner demographics and types of crimes committed. Also, while Norway’s society is certainly more egalitarian and homogenous than the United States’, Norway’s prison system hasn’t always been this way. Norway in the 1980s had a harsh punitive system with an emphasis on punitiveness and security. The recidivism rate was around 60-70%, like in the US. After reforming its prison system to one based on rehabilitation and support, though, the efficacy of its prisons in reducing crime skyrocketed. More, the United States has regressed rather than progressed: before the “Tough on Crime” movement of the 1970s and 1980s, the US had more rehabilitative prison processes in place. These processes were successful in combating recidivism, promoting humanity, and being economical. But, we have since moved away from these policies. Thus, all metrics indicate that rehabilitative practices today would be just as beneficial in the US as in other countries.

At the end of the day, Norway’s humane prison system has received international praise and commendation: it has provided copious amounts of evidence that rehabilitative justice is better for society, mental health, crime rates, and the economy. Even outside of Norway, statistical and empirical studies have confirmed the efficacy of such measures. If the US chooses to ignore this excess of evidence, it will

never be able to reduce crime without resorting to heavy-handedness and hyper-punitiveness. Systems that produce rather than reduce crime must clearly be changed. More, when crafting prison systems, the humane treatment of every person should not be subject to debate. All in all, modeled after Norway's rehabilitative system (and even some past American policies themselves), there is no justification to not reform the US criminal justice system.

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