

## **TOXIC PRISON CULTURE CREATES MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS FOR CORRECTIONS STAFF, INMATES, AND THEIR FAMILIES**

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### **ABSTRACT:**

Exclusive emphasis on security by prison authorities rather than a balanced humanistic approach can create a toxic culture as detrimental to corrections personnel as it is to incarcerated persons. The results promote a combative environment void of basic human needs identified in Maslow's highly respected *Hierarchy of Needs Theory*.<sup>i</sup>

### **SELF PRESERVATION REACTIONS TO THE TOXIC ENVIRONMENT ARE COUNTERPRODUCTIVE**

The resulting climate of *mutual* paranoia and disrespect creates a ripple effect of serious mental health issues and unproductive behaviors with harmful, often deadly consequences including addictions, assaults, riots and suicides. Each of these adverse consequences can spillover affecting families, friends, and entire communities at an enormous financial and emotional costs. These factors could be reversed by effective corrections staff training and relevant therapeutic and addiction intervention with inmates. Balancing security-mindedness with a more supportive and therapeutic environment that fulfills Maslow's identified *Hierarchy of Needs* for healthy lifestyles can diminish financial and emotional

costs and increase safety and quality of life for all affected parties.<sup>ii</sup>

### **THE COMMUNITY IMPACT**

A toxic prison culture can lead to increased victimization and widen the Empathy Gap (the lack of empathy for others) that promotes disregard and disdain for people different from ourselves. The resulting high rate of chronic mental health conditions and substance abuse can fracture families<sup>iii</sup> both diminishing safety and quality of life for all involved and waste critical social resources; thus, placing a severe economic drain on taxpayers.<sup>iv</sup>

### **WHY WE CARE?**

"*The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons.*" So wrote Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevski in 1862 after spending four years as a political prisoner in Russia's grotesquely inhumane prisons. After 27 years in South African prisons, its former President Nelson Mandela declared, "The way a society treats its prisoners is one of the sharpest reflections of its character." If the United States were to be characterized by its prisons, how would it fare? The U.S. has boasted of its humanitarianism for centuries, with citizens espousing that we should treat others as we wish to be treated. Yet we have turned a blind eye as our nation's prisons deteriorated to little more than highly profitable cesspools where mutual disrespect between staff and inmates has become the accepted norm.

The resulting toxicity affects jailers as much as inmates and promotes an ever-widening Empathy Gap wherein the majority of our society has grown complacent, even joking that those entering our prisons will return to society far worse than when they entered.

With 10,000 prisoners released weekly, 95% of those we incarcerate will one day return to our communities to become our neighbors.<sup>v</sup> If we care about our quality of life, it behooves us to assure they return as far better neighbors than they were before they were incarcerated. We can do that by assuring, not that they are coddled, but rather, during their incarceration they are rehabilitated with all things necessary to lead safe, productive and healthy lifestyles upon community reentry.<sup>vi</sup>



## THE COST OF DOING NOTHING

<sup>i</sup> Maslow's Theory of the Human Hierarchy of Needs: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/hidden-and-see/201205/our-hierarchy-needs>

<sup>ii</sup> Findings of Safety & Justice Challenge of the MacArthur Foundation: <http://www.safetyandjusticechallenge.org/>

<sup>iii</sup> Children and Families of the Incarcerated Sheet – Rutgers: <https://nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu/files/nrccfi-fact-sheet-2014.pdf>

<sup>iv</sup> The Full Cost of Incarceration: [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/mass-incarceration-cost\\_us\\_57d82d99e4b09d7a687fde21](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/mass-incarceration-cost_us_57d82d99e4b09d7a687fde21)

<sup>v</sup> Reentry Trends: Bureau of Justice Statistics: <https://www.bjs.gov/content/reentry/reentry.cfm>

<sup>vi</sup> Treatment or Incarceration? National and State Findings on the Efficacy and Cost Savings of Drug Treatment vs Incarceration: [http://www.justicepolicy.org/uploads/justicepolicy/documents/04-01\\_rep\\_mdreatmentorincarceration\\_ac-dp.pdf](http://www.justicepolicy.org/uploads/justicepolicy/documents/04-01_rep_mdreatmentorincarceration_ac-dp.pdf)

The continuation of *punitive-only* mass incarceration only serves to diminish quality of life for everyone living in this country and does absolutely nothing to increase the safety and productivity in our communities. Our failure to substantially reform our criminal justice system can continue to diminish the quality of life for entire communities plagued by absent citizens who, while incarcerated, provide absolutely no benefit to their families or communities. Families may continue to be fractured, with more and more children devastated by the incarceration of their parents. High incidences of mental health disorders and suicides<sup>vii</sup> may continue to escalate, not only for prisoners and their families, but for those who work in criminal justice institutions.<sup>viii</sup>; <sup>ix</sup>And of course, the exorbitant financial costs of incarceration will continue to skyrocket and impact families and taxpayers<sup>x</sup>.

## ENDNOTES:

<sup>vii</sup> How Sending Mentally Ill to Jail is a Cost to Us All: <http://www.takepart.com/article/2015/05/18/when-sickness-crime>

<sup>viii</sup> Do Corrections Officers Have a Higher Suicide Rate? <https://www.correctionsone.com/corrections/articles/8564105-Do-correctional-officers-have-a-higher-suicide-rate/>

<sup>ix</sup> Stress Management for Professional Corrections Officers: <http://www.steelepublishing.com/co-stress>

<sup>x</sup> Ibid

For more information, please visit: [www.  
http://prisonersfamilyconference.org](http://prisonersfamilyconference.org); see also the Advocacy in Action Coalition [AIAC], <http://prisonersfamilyconference.org/>. To get involved with the AIAC, contact Carolyn Esparza, Chairperson of the International Prisoner Family Conference at: [info@prisonersfamilyconference.org](mailto:info@prisonersfamilyconference.org)  
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