

Digging Out from Prison: A Pathway to Rehabilitation

By James Jller



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The United States locks up roughly one-fourth of the world's prison population, and with virtually no constructive results to show for it, says the author.

the former head of a Colorado prison, "lacking in any human decency or dignity." For inmates paroled or released, the best they could expect was a marginalized role in society. As felons they had lost the opportunity to vote, serve on juries, or acquire government employment; the stigma and trauma of time served would follow them for life. Most inmates left prison harder, angrier, and less willing or able to assimilate in society. "What is served by the failure of the prison?" asked Michel Foucault in 1979.¹

Three decades later, Foucault's question is more relevant and disturbing than ever. The United States prison population, which totaled less than 150,000 inmates when Cash sang his condemnation, seems quaint compared to the numbers today. By the start of 2013, the United States had almost 2.3 million people incarcerated—roughly one-fourth of the entire world's prison population. Of that figure, almost 80 percent were in for nonviolent, often drug-related crimes. Politicians base election campaigns on a "tough on crime" stance with results such as harsher sentencing laws, non-parole sentences, three-strikes-you're-out, and other minimum-sentence mandates. But the financial and social costs of implementing these laws have skyrocketed.

*San Quentin, what good do you think you do?
Do you think I'll be different when you're through?
You bent my heart and mind and you may my soul,
And your stone walls turn my blood a little cold.*

*May your walls fall and may I live to tell.
May all the world forget you ever stood.
And may all the world regret you did no good.*
— Johnny Cash

Johnny Cash sang these lyrics to a live crowd behind walls at San Quentin Prison in 1962. The roar of approval from the crowd of inmates on that day needs little explanation. Life in this Northern California prison typified the inmate experience as an egregious stint in an unforgiving human warehouse—a system bent on punishment rather than any form of rehabilitation, and one, as stated by

Today, the United States spends more than \$80 billion a year on its criminal justice system. In states such as New York, Florida, and California, more is spent on keeping people in prison than is spent on higher education. In California, for example, it costs almost \$45,000 to keep an inmate in prison for a year, while only \$15,000 to send that same person to the state university system. For all the money allocated to locking people up, very little targets rehabilitation. In the 1970s and '80s criminologists determined that education played a key role in preventing inmates from returning to prison: data proved that those who received a college education while they were incarcerated were more likely to lead crime-free lives after their release. But in 1993, in an effort to dispel the budding perceptions that incarceration was soft on prisoners, the Pell Grant, which paid for college programs, was eliminated from prison. State, city, and county budgets from around the country allocated limited resources instead to security within existing prisons and the construction of super-max facilities—a one-size-fits-all structure that leaves little room and imagination for positive social interaction.

To make matters worse, those released from prison—and the majority of inmates will be released—keep going back. The overall recidivism rate in the United States hovers around 67 percent from ex-prisoners committing new crimes or violating parole. Released felons tend to congregate in marginalized neighborhoods, where rent is cheap and work is rooted in the underground economy. Simply leaving one's house for a cup of coffee risks a score of parole violations, some as innocuous as contact with another felon. These core neighborhoods have a disproportionately high percentage of families torn apart by incarceration: One in three black males under the age of 30 will spend time behind bars. Children of parents in prison have a 55–60 percent chance of becoming incarcerated. The trend is a downward spiral that drains communities of their tax bases and turns them into wells of underemployed and undereducated residents unable to compete in an increasingly technological economy.

It's no wonder that these taxpayer dollars have not demonstrated any efficient return on capital investment: the concept of social investment in our prison system has been completely neglected. But these institutions must hold some culpability for returning inmates to society in worse shape than when they arrived. The real question criminal justice authorities need to be asking is how to re-engage prisoners with positive social, educational, and employment activities that will make them better citizens after release. Though no silver bullet exists, our prison institutions must start somewhere.

For 15 years, I have worked in jails and state prisons in both New York and Florida and advised in numerous other states throughout the country, both building and administering educational-based horticulture therapy programs. While these programs operate on a small scale relative to our prison-industrial complex, they offer an important counterweight to the prevailing concept that the harshness of prison will prove a deterrent to crime. In fact, gardening and organic horticultural practices in prison contain a valuable concert of activities and opportunities, lending

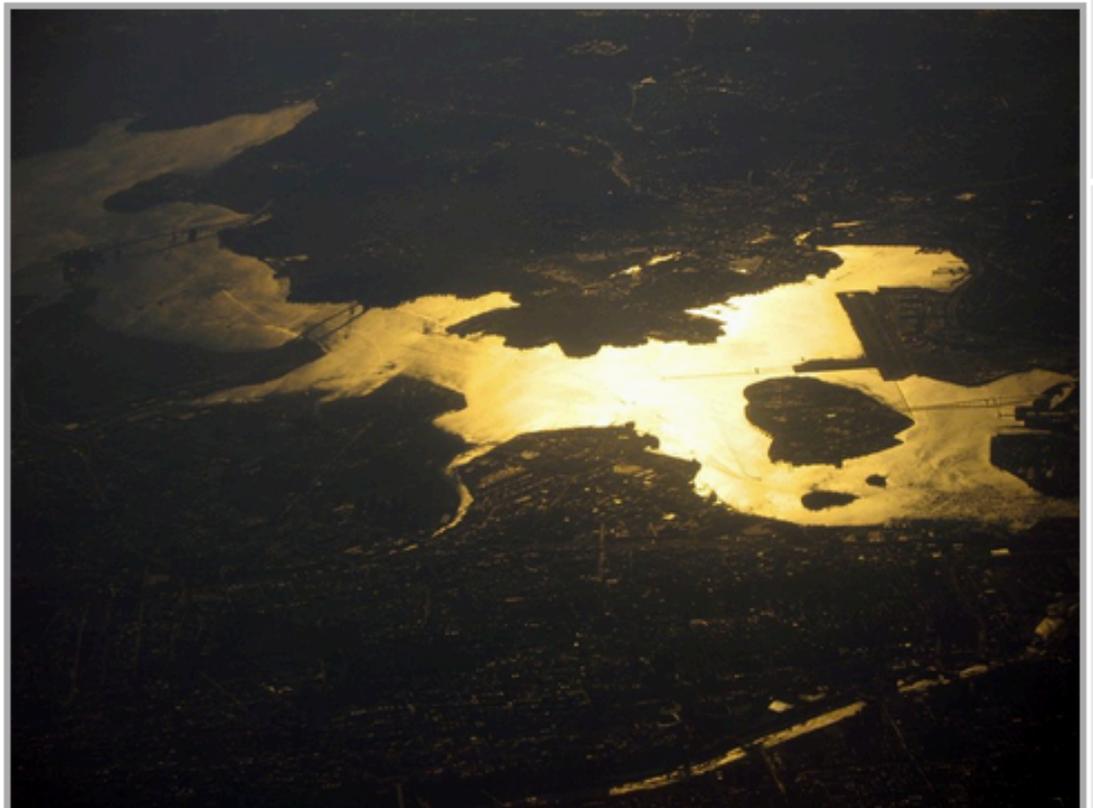


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powerfully to human recovery.

Rikers Island prison in New York City, at right. At Rikers, the author first witnessed the transformative power of gardening on prisoners.

For one, inmates, especially

repeat offenders, have to see success in their own work in order to build their self-esteem, reliably damaged through the shame and social stigma of incarceration. It does not take a high level of education or skill to experience initial success in gardening. And for many inmates who have experienced much failure in life, a little success goes a long way. But to develop the skills needed to find a job later on takes a higher level of education and articulation. That is a major and essential difference between *programs* and *work details*, the latter popularized by the image of prisoners tending long rows of produce under the watchful eye of guards on horseback. The former is rather a process of curriculum formation, language, experience, decision making, and skill development.

Through programs that teach the science of gardening, inmates learn that knowledge is empowerment. They shed their identity as inmates and become students. As a result, they take a greater interest in what they do, and become more skilled and passionate gardeners. I say this because I have witnessed it, time and time again. The hopelessness of ever finding a skilled job after release, a job that provides enjoyment and dignity in a complex technological world, is replaced by a greater sense of purpose.

On Rikers Island, New York City's main jail complex, the Horticulture Society of New York administers the GreenHouse Program—a 6–8 month, hands-on horticulture curriculum that also provides inmates transitional employment as gardeners throughout the city after their release. As director of this program from 1996 to 2008, I worked with almost 650 individuals and found that I could train a majority of them to become professional gardeners, many capable of earning \$35,000 a year as horticulturists with New York park conservancies and other public or private agencies.

But keeping a job is often more difficult than finding one. A number of ex-inmates lost good, professional jobs because they relapsed, displayed undependable work habits, or violated parole. In most cases, the same psychological issues that brought them to jail led them back. Beyond education and job placement, it is essential to address any mental health struggles undermining the prisoners' best intentions to lead successful lives.

Because the country has criminalized mental illness—data suggests that almost 30 percent of all inmates in the United States have some form of mental illness—the criminal justice system must use prison as a way to heal. However, prison facilities have expended little in expanding psychiatric wards. Conversely, prisons often exacerbate destructive behavior by isolating inmates in traumatizing conditions like solitary confinement. Against this trend, too, gardens prove helpful.

In contrast to the punishing experience of sensory deprivation in prison, gardening provides an avenue for mentally ill inmates to begin a process of healing. Gardening requires a connection to nature and natural processes, two elements bleached from the prison environment but with demonstrated therapeutic benefits, whether people are convalescing in a hospital, recovering from trauma, or suffering from psychological illness.



James Jiler

In a Florida prison, inmates manage a small garden. They make soil by pulverizing rock with tin coffee cans, then adding kitchen waste. It can take up to three months to ready a three-by-eight-foot bed for planting.

At Rikers, we worked with horticultural therapists to counter the triggers of depression, drug use, fear, and other psychosomatic disorders among inmates. We did this in a way not practiced in traditional settings, using garden design specifically centered on sensory stimulation. Inmates could lose themselves in moments of silence and solitude. Animals such as chickens, rabbits, ducks, and turtles, along with the myriad wild birds that visited the garden, offered opportunities to nurture. Everything created at the two-acre greenhouse garden countered what was happening in the criminal justice system's approach to building and running a prison.

Concern for the physical condition of inmates was also taken into consideration in designing the program. Outdoors work and the consumption of freshly grown food was once believed to have a transformative effect on human behavior, a concept formalized in early-twentieth-century U.S. prison reforms that defined a new concept of rehabilitation. Yet today, prison work farms have given way to super-max and medium-security facilities, which limit time for exercise and outdoor activities and devote a majority of human labor towards work details. Food is contracted and brought in by outside facilities and is typically high in starch, fat, and sugars. Poor diet, poor ventilation, and limited physical activity have taken a toll on inmate health. This has, in turn, created an escalation in prison health costs. For inmates over 55, medical costs can average \$50,000 a year. In some female facilities, where the HIV rate can reach 20 percent, health care is a constant expense.

Nutrition is also thought to play a role in behavior. Oxford University is currently conducting a study that looks at the relationship between nutritional intake and incidents of violence. The study builds on research carried out in 2002 that showed "violence in young offenders fell 26 percent when given nutritional supplements—and serious offenses dropped off even more sharply, with a 37 percent reduction in acts like fighting, assaulting guards, and taking hostages."²

The National Institutes of Health has looked specifically at the effects of omega-3 supplements on behavioral patterns, and found that patients with violent records, when taking such supplements, showed one-third less anger and hostility. Supplements can be replaced with appropriate food diets. Despite the fact that prisons seem to have both plenty of land and labor to grow highly nutritious fruits and vegetables, there are few programs to speak of.

In my experience, student inmates who gardened, learned about what they were growing, and uncovered the effect of nutrition on physical and emotional health became increasingly receptive to eating fresh produce. Foods rich in vitamins and protein, such as kale, spinach, broccoli, berries, vine tomatoes, and fresh eggs from the hens, played a steady role in changing poor eating habits. When I asked students for words to describe how they felt after three months of gardening and eating fresh food, those expressed most commonly were: *healthy, relaxed, at peace, strong, hopeful*. Most of the inmates mentioned they would be more conscious of the food they and their families ate once they left prison.

Unfortunately, prisons are not always receptive to the changes described above. At a prison in South Florida, where I currently run a gardening program for elderly men, the institution has effectively prevented us from growing enough food to provide the kitchen with produce. Tools, supplies, water, mulch, and kitchen compost are severely limited. Corrections staff randomly remove plants and trees. At one point, over 50 papaya trees in the garden site and three small loquat fruit trees were cut and disposed of; fresh fruit, I was told by the warden, could be made into alcohol.

Any foodstuff in prison is a potential source of alcohol, as every warden knows. But papayas—along with their potential as moonshine stock—are a rich source of antioxidants, which can help prevent heart attacks and strokes as well as digestive ailments as severe as pancreatic cancer.

Prison officials cite any number of reasons why programs can't work: security, budgets, officer shortages. From my experience, it seems mostly a lack of will, if not a lack of interest. In South Florida, for example, despite an abundance of silt and hay outside the fence line, or free manure available from surrounding animal farms, inmates working in the garden there form soil by pulverizing and scraping substrate coral rock with the tops of tin coffee cans, then adding kitchen waste to the residue. It can take up to three months to ready a three-by-eight-foot bed for planting.

Seeds are smuggled in or plants appear by chance from kitchen compost. Whatever food and herbs are grown, the gardeners consume themselves, perhaps staving off the inevitable medical costs incurred by elderly prisoners. With material support from the prison, we could easily quadruple production, as well as grow food and seedlings for community gardens and food banks.

In 2009 I approached a women's prison in the same region and offered to start a horticultural therapy and job skill program, at no cost to the state, and was rebuffed for two years until my funding ran out.

These are not encouraging outcomes.



Cyril Ruoso

A worker in the Washington State Sustainability in Prisons Project. In some cases, part of the harvest is delivered to local food banks, reconnecting inmates with their community.

In contrast, the country of Norway has embraced a different path in the operation of Bastøy Prison, also known as the world's "eco-greenest" prison. Bastøy has solar panels and a wood-fire heating system instead of oil heat. Prisoners tend organic gardens, which supply their food, along with 200 chickens, 40 sheep, and 20 cows. The inmates also maintain the fields surrounding the prison and a 30-foot fishing boat.

For Norwegian officials, an institution like Bastøy is critical if the prison experience is to make a lasting impact on prisoners and give them somewhere to reflect, interact, and learn new skills. The thinking, rightly, is that most individuals serving time in Norway will be integrated back into society and therefore rehabilitation is essential.

Following suit, the State of Washington created the Sustainability in Prisons Project. Their showcase facility is Cedar Creek, a state medium-security facility. There, about 60 inmates are selected for a "greening program" where they compost the prison's food waste, tend an organic vegetable garden, collect rainwater for gardens, raise bees, and hand-sort recyclables. Other projects include the Washington Correction Center and the Mission Creek Corrections Center, both established for women and centered on organic food production and the promotion of individual and family health. Mission Creek inmates also harvest and deliver food to a local food bank, thereby reconnecting prisoners to the outside community.

Programs such as those in Washington and Rikers Island, along with other programs sprinkled discretely throughout the country, can demonstrate the value of horticulture as a cost-effective method for changing destructive human behavior. Whether such programs will soon spur a dramatic shift in our criminal justice system, or will simply be adopted by the idiosyncratic interests of particular wardens, remains to be seen.

What is known, however, is that our criminal justice system is under fire to prove that the huge social and economic cost expended in warehousing inmates offers some reward. The consensus among lawmakers and the tax-paying public is that the system is broken. The growing demand to fix it calls notably for programs to return inmates from prison in better condition than when they arrived. Horticulture and related, green jobs programming are a small but cost-effective step in turning a punitive prison culture into one of rehabilitation—one grounded in dignity and decency for the individual. Reform-minded officials need to develop programs further with a best-practices curriculum—a standard model that can be replicated throughout the country—until the prison farm once more has a meaningful and powerful role in prison.

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