

OPINION

Our Prison System is Bankrupting Us

Need smarter and more compassionate approach

BY SARAH VAN GELDER

If there was any doubt about the broken state of our prison system, recent news should put it to rest.



The Global Commission on Drug Policy, made up of former presidents and other luminaries from the United States and abroad, just concluded that the Drug War is an expensive failure. The California prison system—which the U.S. Supreme Court declared to be in violation of the 8th Amendment due to overcrowding and neglect—has yet to develop a plan to bring it into compliance with the court order.

Less well publicized, but also disturbing, is a letter from Tom Lutz in which he resigns from his post as department chair at the University of California Riverside. Lutz warns that the state is dismantling in just a few years a world-class system of higher education. Funding has shifted dramatically from educating California's

young to imprisoning them—not a way to build a strong country.

Meanwhile, massive state budget deficits are worsened by the expense of locking up more of our own citizens than any other country in the world.

Perhaps we're finally ready for a reassessment. What might a more effective and rational system look like?

As we researched the summer issue of YES!, "Beyond Prisons," we found a blossoming of creative alternatives to the punitive drug war and to the criminal justice system's expensive punishment ethic.

People behind bars for drug possession make up the greatest share of the massive uptick in the prison population. The experts we talked to, including a former police chief and a medical doctor who specializes in addiction, called for an end to the war on drugs. Instead of punishing drug addicts—many of whom are victims of trauma—treatment, needle exchanges, and safe housing lessen addiction, disease, and the crimes caused by drug use.

Most of the 2.3 million now in prison will eventually be released. Education and job training are proven ways to reduce the

number who reoffend and return to prison. Ex-offenders and ex-addicts can be the best mentors of those released from prison; the Delancey Street Project, for example, offers peer support and job-skills training in businesses run by ex-inmates and addicts, and their success record is impressive.

Traditional approaches to crime hold special promise. In New Zealand, instead of locking up young offenders, a council made up of family, community members, and crime victims holds them accountable for their crimes, and then gives them an opportunity to make restitution and be reintegrated into the community. This approach, which borrows from the Maori people, has become the norm in New Zealand, reducing to almost zero the number of young people locked up in expensive and violent detention facilities.

This "restorative justice" approach is spreading. Studies show crime victims who are involved in victim-offender mediation processes are less likely to experience long-term post-traumatic stress.

The involvement of the broader community is key to the success of restorative approaches. A welding instructor who

volunteers to instruct inmates, a Girl Scout leader who brings girls to visit their imprisoned mothers, or a garden club that helps inmates start prison gardens all do their part to create vital links to the outside.

There are people we might agree should be locked up: psychopathic killers, rapists, and others who endanger their families or communities. But most of those in prison are people with few resources who have committed nonviolent offenses—especially poor people, people of color, drug users, alcoholics, and the mentally challenged.

Imprisoning millions of these people does not make us safer. But imprisoning 2.3 million people does deplete government coffers resulting in massive cuts in programs—like California's system of higher education—that have proven track records for reducing crime.

A smarter and more compassionate criminal justice system could not only save lives and restore communities especially hard hit by imprisonments, it could save us from fiscal meltdown.

Sarah van Gelder is executive editor of YES! Magazine.

Inaccurate claim on Women, Beauty and Race

'Psychology Today' blog supported racism

BY VILMARYS PICHARDO

A lot of outrage was provoked when Psychology Today published a blog on race and beauty titled, "Why Are Black Women Less Physically Attractive than Other Women, And Not Men."

The recent post was written by Satoshi Kanazawa, a Japanese journalist and professor at the London School of Economics who uses evolutionary psychology to examine economic, social and anthropological issues.

Kanazawa referred to a study conducted by the University of North to make what he calls a "scientific" analysis on why "black women are objectively less physically attractive than other women."

He then faced an investigation by the London School and was fired. His article

was removed from Psychology Today's website.

The magazine's editor-in-chief, Kaja Purina, delivered the following apology:

"A blog post about race and appearance by Satoshi Kanazawa was published—and promptly removed—from this site. We deeply apologize for the pain and offense that this post caused. Psychology Today's mission is to inform the public, not to provide a platform for inflammatory and offensive material. Psychology Today does not tolerate racism or prejudice of any sort. The post was not approved by Psychology Today, but we take full responsibility for its publication on our site. We have taken measures to ensure that such an incident does not occur again. Again, we are deeply sorry for the hurt that this post caused."

Kanazawa's article, to no surprise, offended many.

But because the claims he made contradict the values in Psychology Today's own mission statement, the question that

still prevails is how and why was Kanazawa's article published in the first place?

Did the publication's editors miss the bizarre claims made in the article or was Kanazawa's analysis viewed as an interesting and scientific approach to the psychology of beauty in relationship to racial differences?

The idea that beauty is in the eye of the beholder is a common phenomena. Notions of beauty often differ among people and communities and furthermore are likely to be influenced by popular culture, power structures and social constructs.

When taking a close look at the data the "evolutionary psychologist" used for his article, it is obvious that he chose to focus on a specific part of the study. The study was composed of two groups, adolescent aged participants and adults.

The adolescents, between the ages of 12 and 17, were said to perceive black women as less attractive than other women. Meanwhile the adults who participated in

the study could not draw the implication that African-American women were perceived as less attractive than other women.

Instead of writing a piece on why the teenagers who participated in the study perceived black women as they did, Kanawaza decided to perceive their results as "objective" data and preceded with making what he claims were "scientific" conclusions. He made the analysis that black women are perceived as less attractive due to their testosterone levels.

The offensive and peculiar article brings up multiple concerns, ranging from why was Kanazawa's article published, to who's to say who is or isn't beautiful, to the question of why "scientists" and professionals such as Kanazawa feel comfortable with making such inaccurate, and poorly researched claims to promote racism?

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