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Stone walls, iron bars

We can't simply lock up poverty and crime

By John L. McKnight

The United States now locks up a larger portion of its people than any other nation, according to a new Justice Department report. This represented 948,881 people in 1993—more than triple the number imprisoned in 1980. But in spite of this nation's radical imprisonment policies, public officials across the United States are poised to stiffen penalties for dozens of crimes and provide billions of additional dollars for prison construction.

The problem is that no matter how many jails we build and how many years we lock people up, the criminal justice system cannot solve the system failures that lead to crime.

This is because our incarceration rate is largely the result of the failure of four great public systems that were created in the last century to provide a safety net for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged. Designed to ensure a productive society, the systems include public schools, the program of welfare benefits, public housing and various job training and employment programs.

Undoubtedly many Americans have benefited from these systems, but over the years the safety net has become counterproductive. It is failing miserably to keep the least advantaged within the productive boundaries of society and has increasingly created effects that are the opposite of its intentions. Neighborhoods that have traditionally been stepping stones to the center of society are much more likely to lead to crime than to prosperity.

As schools, the welfare system, housing projects and jobs programs lost their productive power and neighborhoods steeply declined, the human service system prospered. By the 1990s in most cities, more than 60 percent of all low income program dollars went to service, commodity and housing providers, and the remaining dollars provided meager incomes that actually represented legislated poverty.

Instead of helping poor people to move out of poverty, the well-intentioned service systems have turned neighborhood residents into dependent clients caught up in a frustrating cycle of survival.

The human services largely have replaced the spiritual glue that traditionally held these neighborhoods together—family, relatives, neighbors, block clubs, neighborhood associations and churches. In the process, neighbors began to understand that their well-being was related to services received rather than the product of their creative capacity.

But the human service system has not fixed enough lives to make neighborhoods productive. Nor has it fixed the failing primary public systems that caused their growth. Instead it has further entangled the web of hopelessness that engulfs poor neighborhoods.

The erosion of economic opportunity and the weakening of local communities are key to understanding how such well-meaning plans to help the poor went awry. The safety net of human services was designed to enhance these two primary resources.

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They were replaced by high-tech and service industries that were largely located in suburbs and not within easy reach of inner-city residents. Far from being stepping stones to productive lives, those jobs that remained were low paying and dead end.

Residents of these communities are normal people trapped in an abnormal world. As they seek survival in the hopeless spaces available, they react in many ways. They strike out in anger—as many of us would. They create productive, Phoenix-like new ventures and initiatives—as many of us would. And they despair and retreat into addictions—as many of us would.

The House and Senate crime bills certainly are not the answer to our failed public systems. Rather, policy makers need to concentrate on the conditions that lock people in such abnormal environments.

If we are to restore the stepping stones from low-income neighborhoods into the center of society, there must be a relentless focus upon initiatives that regenerate income and jobs and a new commitment to enhancing the powers of local community associations, churches and neighborhood organizations as the principal agents of support and problem solving.

To achieve this end, all public programs should be tested against these two policy questions:

1. Does the public investment increase the income or the economic opportunity of the person of low income?
2. Does the public investment support the local community and its organizations and associations to do the basic work that needs to be done?

To act on these principles will require hard choices. We are a society coming to grips with the recognition that our resources are limited. We cannot invest in growing human services and correctional systems while increasing investments in economy and community.

Indeed, if we keep investing in failed services and correctional systems, the economic and community stepping stones to a viable society will vanish under the rising tide of hopelessness.

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