Extract Our Prisons from a Culture of Hate

Editorial:

By Matthew S. Rosenthal and Robin S. Toma

The California Independent Review Panel for Corrections came out with a comprehensive report on prison reform recently, after having consulted with myriad agencies and outside organizations on a variety of issues. The Institute for the Study and Prevention of Hate Crimes (*) advised the panel on what to do about personal and group conflict, based on race and ethnicity, inside the system.

Their report makes important strides in terms of reform. It asks for civilian oversight and has come up with ways to eliminate the dreaded code of silence amongst staff. Nevertheless, although the report makes crucial steps toward improvement, its recommendations are not enough because it ignores how race-based gangs, and their criminal enterprises, have become endemic to state prison culture largely due to the system’s complicity.

This omission may turn out to be a major error on the panel’s part since hate-motivated group conflict inside our prisons poses a direct threat to mainstream society. The majority of prisoners are not incarcerated for life, so they take their prison experiences with them back into their communities upon release. If a prisoner of one racial or ethnic identity is targeted for rape or beatings by members of an opposing racial gang, the resulting trauma may decrease social functionality, cause additional family deterioration, and make rehabilitative efforts ineffectual. Moreover, newly hardened, racist prisoners may aggravate local racial tensions when they go home.

The panel’s recommendations are not without merit. They did focus upon creative law enforcement techniques, how to lower inmate populations, and increased access to rehabilitation. These are all exemplary ideas. Nonetheless, such reforms may not be enough. In California, race-based gangs are essentially institutionalized into the system and, for years, have fraternized with a number of corrections officers whom may feel the need to maintain the status quo out of fear of being exposed for inappropriate affiliations. Prison gangs have vast economic enterprises with networks on the outside as well that will not easily relinquish them – drugs, prostitution, extortion, etc. since the organization of group hatred inside our prisons results in economic benefits, it has manifested a web of bigotry that is resilient to change.

Beyond economics, however, group affiliation is now part-and-parcel of social policy. Our adult facilities are often segregated upon racial lines, in part, to facilitate ‘lock-downs’, and periods of dissociation and isolation, which are largely required by regular break-outs of violence. Prisoners often demand segregation or threaten in-cell violence, which would cause chaos. Gay men, and any prisoners perceived as weak, run the risk of being subjugated to entire groups. Race riots can occur in an entire prison wing because two prisoners that identify with different backgrounds get into a fight, even when the
cause of that fight is unrelated to race. Additionally, many people, including youth, have
gone into the system “unaffiliated” and have come out a gang member and/or neo-Nazi,
newly tattooed and hardened, all in direct contrast with the goal of corrections, and as a
subsequent threat to public safety.

Understandably, the burden should not be placed solely on prisons to correct the racism
already found on the street. However, prisons do have literally a ‘captive audience,’ and
can take basic measures to counter racism, bigotry, and homophobia.

Our goal should be to shape and eradicate the poisonous extremist ideology that is
corrosive and pervasive in our penal system. It is the human element of bigotry and
racism that we must attack within the institution. It is the source of social and emotional
struggle for those under its yoke. The panel’s current suggestion for reform, while
laudable, may be a little more than a lot of lipstick on a pig.

Gdrive/shared/newsletter long version of prisons of hate

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