Rethinking Prison

If We Were Starting Over, Would We Build This System?



The United States incarcerates more people than almost any other developed nation.

We spend tens of billions of dollars each year on prisons, jails, and corrections. Yet few people seem satisfied with the results. Crime remains a concern. Recidivism remains high. Victims often receive little compensation. Taxpayers bear enormous costs.

The debate usually centers on whether prisons should be harsher or more lenient. Perhaps we should ask a different question.

If we were designing a correctional system from scratch today, would we build the one we have?

The primary purpose of prison is clear: protect society by separating dangerous individuals from the public. On that measure, prisons largely succeed.

But what else should a correctional system accomplish?

Should victims receive restitution?

Should offenders contribute to society while serving their sentences?

Should taxpayers expect more than simple confinement in return for billions of dollars in annual spending?

These questions suggest a different way of thinking about corrections.

Tier One: Restitution and Accountability

Not all crimes are violent.

For many nonviolent offenders, incarceration may not be the best solution. Instead, offenders could remain in society under strict electronic monitoring while maintaining employment.

A significant portion of their earnings would be directed toward restitution, court costs, and supervision expenses.

The objective would not be comfort. The objective would be accountability.

Offenders would work, support their families when possible, compensate victims, and remain under close supervision.

Society would remain protected while avoiding many of the costs associated with incarceration.

Tier Two: Secure Work Communities

Violent offenders present a different challenge.

For those who commit serious violent crimes but are not repeat offenders, secure work communities could provide an alternative to traditional prisons.

These facilities would be located on federal land and protected by secure perimeters. Housing would be simple and inexpensive. Work would be mandatory.

The focus would be on projects that are often neglected because of limited funding or manpower:

- Reforestation
- Wildfire prevention
- Trail construction
- Watershed restoration
- Wetland restoration
- Flood mitigation projects
- Habitat improvement
- Demolition and reclamation of abandoned prisons, military facilities, and other government properties
- Agricultural production for humanitarian relief and famine assistance programs

The goal would be punishment, accountability, and productive contribution.

Offenders would lose their freedom, but they would spend their time creating something of value rather than remaining idle.

Tier Three: Permanent Separation

Some offenders demonstrate through repeated actions that they cannot safely live in society.

Serial killers, repeat violent offenders, and others who pose an ongoing threat may never be suitable candidates for release.

For these offenders, society's first responsibility is public safety.

Permanent secure communities could provide lifetime separation from society while avoiding the enormous expense of modern prison complexes.

Residents would receive basic necessities, including food, shelter, medical care, and access to approved educational and recreational reading

materials. The emphasis would be on responsibility and productive work rather than entertainment.

They would also work.

The work might include conservation projects, land restoration, humanitarian agriculture, demolition of abandoned federal facilities, or other public-benefit projects.

The objective would not be profit. In some cases, reclaimed prison sites and abandoned military facilities could be returned to productive use or sold, generating additional value for taxpayers.

The objective would be responsibility.

Those who have taken from society would spend the remainder of their lives contributing to it.

The objective would not be revenge. The objective would be permanent accountability combined with public benefit.

A Different Question

I do not pretend to have the answer to prison reform.

Perhaps this three-tier approach would not work. Perhaps there are better ideas.

But when a system costs billions of dollars each year, affects millions of lives, and leaves few people satisfied, it is worth asking whether a better system is possible.

The real question is not whether prisons should be tougher or more lenient.

The real question is whether our correctional system is producing the outcomes we want.

If we were designing that system today, what would it look like?