

WTE Column of March 5, 2014. Editor's Headline: "War on Drugs has Failed Us"

Legislators have a stake in believing the laws they enact are effective. So it was not surprising that, in recent conversation with Rep. Steve Harshman, R-Casper, the representative held forth on the millions spent on a War on Drugs that, supposedly, keeps America safe.

When he came up for air I commented that incarcerating a substance-abuser does nothing for the individual—or for society at large—unless a recovery program and subsequent social reintegration is part of the sentence. As for certain low-level nonviolent drug offenders, I mentioned last year's decision by the Department of Justice to quit seeking federal mandatory minimum sentences, suggesting, Wyoming take a page from it. Ryan Frost's recent opinion piece calling the war on drugs "nothing short of failure" speaks to the point.

Mr. Harshman said he was unacquainted with Mr. Frost's column, so I offered to scan and email it to him, which I did, alluding in passing to Michelle Alexander's recent "The New Jim Crow" that argues—fairly and persuasively, it must be said—that the ballooning incarceration of African American and Hispanic populations is motivated by racism and upheld by white privilege. Mr. Harshman contended that, since Wyoming's population of color is minuscule, it could not be a factor in the state's harsh lawmaking and enforcement, the aim of which, he believes, is not punitive but corrective.

I beg to differ. For those with ears to hear and eyes to see, Wyoming's Hispanic and African American residents are readily discernible. As for any corrective value of incarceration, it's questionable.

When you're locked up, you are locked out of the American mainstream and trapped within America's latest caste system. Incarceration brings with it loss of voting rights, loss of access to student loans, loss of housing and food assistance, all of which engender poverty, high unemployment, homelessness, and domestic violence. These prevent the recently-released from contributing labor and deprives the individual of self-respect and the sense that he or she matters. Soon such individuals become afraid to seek the medical care they need; often, they are unable to secure a wholesome education for their children.

A dehumanizing inequality has taken hold in American society. Inequality is more than economic hardship. If young white people were incarcerated at the rate of young black people, it would result in a national emergency, writes Hill Harper in "Letters to an Incarcerated Brother."

Overall, the prison rate for African Americans is seven times higher than that of white, non-Hispanic Americans; in Wyoming, the ratio is 3:1. According to Harper, this country has locked up a larger percentage of its Black population than South Africa did during the worst years of apartheid. More black males are in the grip of the criminal-justice system—in prison, on probation, or on parole—than were enslaved in 1850.

Angela Davis once remarked that American jails and prisons are designed to convert the population into “specimens in a zoo: obedient to our keepers, but dangerous to each other.” Many visitors are convinced that a manipulative purpose is behind the dirty living conditions, unpalatable food, and unchecked violence of many facilities: Prison populations are forced into deliberately stressful living. And, by denying support for the individual who needs to regain a footing upon release, the system ensures the former inmate’s return, often within a few months.

A friend with an incarcerated family member tells me, inmates are shamelessly exploited financially, from ridiculously high telephone charges for local calls to what inmates may buy through the system’s catalogue. No family member may bring food or clothing. During visits, food must be bought from a machine where a packet of Ramen noodles costs \$1; coffee powder is \$1 and makes a dismal 6-oz cup. Prison meals are awful—never an apple or an orange or any palatable vegetable. Incarcerated individuals, says my friend, suffer tremendous stress. There are so many rules to keep track of—and the rules change, depending on the guard on duty—one can never be certain one might not end up with a violation, which often means negating the good-behavior points earned or, worse, to be condemned to isolation, a particularly damaging means of punishment.

Most incarcerated individuals have social, emotional, and psychological problems they’ve unsuccessfully attempted to keep at bay through drugs or alcohol. Incarcerations for drug-related or immigrant violations make up more than 90 percent of all prison populations. The practice tears apart families, imposing untold hardships. In any event, immigrants need help with paperwork and court appearances to straighten out their status; a user needs help in changing his or her life to function without addiction.

Worse off than the inmates are their dependents. In this country, the largest group of people living below the poverty line is its children. Child welfare programs are being slashed by lawmakers whose wealth and obscene consumption ought to be a national shame. Many children end up in a foster-care system that only repeats the abuse or addiction their parents have suffered.

The war on drugs is a war on people devoid of the resources to help themselves. To be “tough on crime” does nothing to solve deep-seated social ills. What’s the chance a legislator will actually give thought to the mayhem our laws unleash? Considering Rodger McDaniel’s recent observations on A.L.E.C. influence-peddling, the answer must be: “Not much of one.” It’s time Wyoming voters woke up and smelled the coffee.