

MORE FROM HOMEPAGE

< 5 things to know about the 49ers ahead of Cowboys divisional round matchup

Prime Prosper corner just north of Universal's future Frisco theme park hits the market >

OPINION

Faith-based programs can restore accountability, rehabilitation to prisons

Useful reforms are hiding in plain sight



Ernest Lawrence participates in worship service during a monthly breakfast at Restoration Outreach of Dallas in Dallas, Texas on Saturday, February 19, 2022. ROD is a faith-based organization that works with both incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals. (Lawrence Jenkins/Special Contributor) (Lawrence Jenkins / Special Contributor)



By Byron R. Johnson
12:01 PM on Jan 14, 2023



Listen to this article now

Powered by **Trinity Audio**

10 10 1.0x

--:--

--:--

Somewhere along the way, we lost our focus on the rehabilitative ideals of the earliest prisons in America.

Early models of correctional practice were more collaborative than those in use by today's prisons, combining state resources with philanthropic, religious and civic assets to better manage and rehabilitate offenders. The main goal was to incentivize future good behaviors, not simply punish former bad ones.

But that was soon abandoned in favor of increasingly punitive and inhumane lockups in the early 19th century, epitomized by the Walnut Street Jail in Philadelphia, a facility so overcrowded and rampant with violence and disease that *Smithsonian* magazine called it “appaling” where, “Men and women, adults and children, thieves and murderers were jailed together in disease-ridden, dirty pens where rape and robbery were common occurrences. Jailors made little effort to protect the prisoners from each other. Instead, they sold the prisoners alcohol, up to nearly twenty gallons of it a day. Food, heat and clothing came at a price. It wasn't unusual for prisoners to die from the cold or starvation.”

Walnut Street became a legacy that has defined the entire history of corrections, one in which that betterment of prisoners was abandoned.

More than 200 years later, it would be hard to overstate the challenges currently facing the American prison system —severe overcrowding, [widespread mental illness](#), [high levels of post-traumatic stress disorder](#), almost nonexistent levels of programming, extreme violence, unforgiving sentences, corrosive [employee turnover](#), [costly recidivism](#) and significantly [higher mortality rates upon release from prison](#). National data reveal that the longer someone spends in prison, the [more likely](#) they are to reoffend.

Because of these toxic burdens, coupled with [shrinking resources](#), today's prisons not only fail to “correct,” they often make things worse. And at great expense to

taxpayers.

Is there a better way?

At Baylor University, we are testing the theory that accountability, rightly understood, is an important tool in returning correctional facilities to their intended purpose of rehabilitation. This project, funded by Templeton Religion Trust, is a multidisciplinary study bringing together philosophers, theologians, psychologists, psychiatrists, sociologists and criminologists, to understand the relation between accountability and other human goods, including such virtues as conscientiousness, empathy, humility and gratitude. Research from this project is helping create a system of measurement that can help assess whether accountability truly helps criminal offenders change their behavior and improves their lives and those of others around them.

Accountability is usually understood in terms of holding a person or group — like public officials, corporations, teachers, and incarcerated individuals — accountable. Regrettably, terms like responsibility and accountability often conjure up negative connotations. But, a sense of accountability can also be embraced in a virtuous manner, and when this happens, it may be beneficial to individuals, families and the larger society. Those who embody this virtue welcome being accountable as desirable and beneficial. They are answerable, transparent and honest about their behavior, adjust their efforts based on feedback, want to be pushed to do their best, and recognize that they improve by being accountable.

Our current prison research documents the effects of faith-based programs on the mental, physical, social and spiritual well-being of offenders. We have found that prisoners who are themselves the beneficiaries of inmate-led field ministry, in turn, [help other prisoners make positive and positive social changes](#). This [new research](#) is helping us understand how accountability may be linked with reconciliation, service to others, offender rehabilitation, identity transformation and the reduction of reoffending.

Indeed, accountability as a virtue may have considerable implications for [restorative justice and prison reform](#), and could provide a significant benefit not only to offenders, but to society as a whole.

Importantly, we now have empirical evidence that by embracing religious faith, inmates can and do transform their lives in important ways, including the opportunity to choose a better self, the development of a new-found sense of their own humanity, and a marked increase in their concern for others.

The work of faith-based organizations and faith-motivated volunteers in prisons is usually overlooked or mischaracterized, as scholars and policy makers largely ignore decades of criminological research documenting how such programs [reduce social isolation](#) and shame among prisoners, and [offer emotional and network pathways that support re-biographing and fresh starts](#). Faith-based approaches are often denied credit for [their extensive](#) and largely [successful efforts](#) in America's prisons. Participation in voluntary religious communities sponsored by faith-motivated volunteers bolsters the lives of inmates with [social capital](#) otherwise inaccessible to them. [Even solitary prayer in prison has been shown to be a highly prosocial and transformative phenomenon.](#)

A new model of corrections is quietly taking hold in the United States — built in part on old ideals, but also putting into place newer practices developed in response to the painful experience of warehousing inmates. By necessity, these new approaches are being developed in some of America's largest maximum-security prisons, and yet they largely remain hidden in plain sight.

Embracing accountability as a virtue may help us think more meaningfully about how to make prisons, and our criminal justice system as a whole, more restorative and less punitive.

Byron R. Johnson is director of the Institute for Studies of Religion and a distinguished professor of social sciences at Baylor University. He wrote this column for The Dallas Morning News.

We welcome your thoughts in a letter to the editor. See the guidelines and [submit your letter here](#).



Byron R. Johnson

Horóscopo para hoy, martes 17 de enero de 2023

Dallas Morning News

DFW megachurch announces it will leave United Methodist denomination

Dallas Morning News
