

The Effectiveness of Rehabilitation in Modern Incarceration Systems

Emma Davis

Editor's Choice Award Winner

One of the most critical elements of a functioning society is the justice system. In recent years, the United States' justice system fails those who fall victim to it. With incarceration rates higher than the international average, our system needs to change. Historically, the United States has prioritized retribution. Many countries, one of which being Sweden, utilize rehabilitation in their justice systems. According to a study by Christopher Hartney from the National Council on Crime and Delinquency, Sweden's incarceration rates are under half the international average; whereas, the United States, at four times the international average, has the highest incarceration rates in the world. The current system demonstrates that the state of our incarceration system is ineffective. Systems that focus more on rehabilitation such as Sweden are more effective.

Throughout the history of the United States, the justice system's purpose has mainly served to punish crimes committed by its citizens. On the other hand, the evolution of the Swedish incarceration systems over the past century has transitioned its priorities from free labor as a source of rehabilitation to focusing on individual needs. Roddy Nilsson, an author from the Journal of Scandinavian Studies in Criminology and Crime Prevention, published an article showing the

development of the Swedish penal system. Before World War II, rehabilitation was defined by productive work done by the inmates. Though this tactic provided experience for the prisoners and products for the community, it was not accomplishing any individual rehabilitation for the inmates. By the 1960s rehabilitation by mandatory work became heavily criticized by the public. This started the Prison Reform that converted the Swedish system to one that prioritizes individual recovery. Many new programs were introduced to alter the destructive behavior that inhibited many inmates. When these inmates return to society, these programs assist them with techniques to avoid any future conflicts that could result in recidivism.

The success of these programs significantly alters the recidivism rates in Sweden. When the definition of success for an incarceration system is the number of people who have served their time and reentered life as a productive member of society, the difference between the effectiveness of the Swedish penal system and the U.S. system reveals the room for improvement in the current U.S. system. The main difference between these two systems is the focus on rehabilitation versus retribution. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, after only two years, 59.5% of all released prisoners in the United States will return to prison; this rate increases to 67.8% after one more year (Durose). These statistics are greatly influenced by the lack of support that the United States provides its inmates. Sweden designed programs to provide support for people with different obstacles that range from drug addiction to extreme aggression (Nilsson). These programs help inmates adapt to their situation and apply coping mechanisms to avoid future conflict to become a functioning member of society. As each of these programs become more personalized, the more effective the treatment will be. Sweden's concern for the wellbeing and rehabilitation of its inmates affects the overall productivity of its justice system.

Along with multiple rehabilitative programs Sweden has multiple alternatives to imprisonment. *Corrections Today* contributor Bertel Osterdahl includes many different solutions other than incarceration in his article "Prison and Probation: The Swedish Perspective," which highlights that a considerable amount of inmates are serving between three months and one year. Probation frequently provides an alternate solution, especially for minor offenses, where it matches the severity of the crime. In the United States, the length of the conviction often outweighs the severity of the crime. This reduces the effectiveness of

the punishment and does not effectively provide rehabilitation to its inhabitants. In Sweden, community sanctions are also another option differing from imprisonment. They are often used to keep up social interactions between inmates and encourage productive behavior. Giving the convicted a sense of community creates a positive environment for rehabilitation. Introducing community as an important contributor to recovery provides inmates with reliable social skills that are useful in society. These alternatives give an affordable and more successful system.

Sweden provides a wide range of programs that proved productivity occurs when the wellbeing of the inmates is a priority. Conversely, the United States remains stuck in a cycle of crime, conviction, and release without concern for the people incriminated. Focusing on rehabilitation provides inmates with life skills on how to avoid reincarceration once they are released. The United States' system uses incarceration to punish those who have a debt to society. The victims in this system end up in and out of jail because it makes no effort to help them return to society as law-abiding citizens. The unwillingness to aid the powerless shows the poor judgment in not only the incarceration system but the judicial system as a whole.

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