

11/14/06

Defeating the United States Prison-Industrial Complex through Early Education

Currently the U.S. has the highest incarceration rate in the world and one of the worst education systems among industrialized nations. Through arguing the strong correlation between the two, I hope to sway my reader's view in hopes of seeing not only the moral argument, but the economic one as well. In order for a nation to progress and raise its standards, policy should be focused to 'bring up' the least fortunate groups in its society. Our current policies for law enforcement and education do not support the progress of the most abject people in our country. We spend more and more every year on prisons with education funding increasing at only a fraction of what law enforcement receives. As a nation, we need to understand that crime cannot simply be solved by adding more and more jail cells and we must put our money into something that can correct these problems, such as the Head Start program. While many opponents of increased funding for education argue that increased spending does not always yield results, we must focus our efforts to earlier in childhood development. By increasing the funding for pre-school education and the Head Start program, we will

see a drop in crime rate, poverty, drug abuse and a less racially-imbalanced prison population.

Currently the U.S. has about 5% of the world population, but we have about 25% of the world's criminals in our jails and prisons. We, as a nation, spend on average in the most recent years \$40 billion a year.¹ Despite this massive amount of funding, crime has increased and the number of repeat offenders who have already spent time in jail has also greatly jumped. Analysts are increasingly saying that previous non-violent criminals are being turned into “‘violent’ career criminals,” and that most of the criminal population will eventually be released.² Even more interesting is the statistic by the Prison Policy Initiative that states that while incarceration rates grew by 343% from 1965-2000, there was absolutely no change in the level of security that Americans felt.³ Perhaps the most chilling of all these statistics in relation to public education *and* the public good is the change in prison and higher education populations for African Americans. From 1980-2000, the prison population for African Americans grew by about 450,000 whereas the higher education population only grew about 150,000.⁴ The Prison Policy Initiative goes on to say that while only 4% of the adult population is completely illiterate, around 18-

¹ War on Drugs PDF

² War on Drugs PDF

³ Prison Policy Initiative website

⁴ Prison Policy Initiative website

19% of prisoners are completely illiterate.⁵ All these statistics are quite surprising, but the growth in the prison industry is even greater than these previous numbers.

The prison industry in America is worth billions of dollars and funding from states is increasingly going to either their own prisons or privately-built and operated ones. Private companies that run and build prisons are becoming increasingly wealthy with little obvious benefit to reduction in crime or real law enforcement. The Prison Policy Initiative presented one statistic that showed that in California in 1996, a correctional officer made around \$45,000 whereas a California school teacher made just over \$30,000.⁶ In the early 1980's, America began to see an adoption of minimum mandatory sentences. The idea was that these new laws would fight the high crime rate, but they mostly just led to the overcrowding of prisons and greater jail time for non-violent criminals. Franklin Zimring, a criminologist at UC Berkley, wrote, "With the power of release taken away from parole authorities, and judge's discretion also removed, it was left to default of the legislatures to set sentencing policy. Punishment became a political decision."⁷ For-profit prison companies and correctional officers' unions frequently lobby to have harsher mandatory sentences and support candidates that support more widespread incarceration. This industry is working hard every day to

⁵ Prison Policy Initiative website

⁶ Prison Policy Initiative website

⁷ War on Drugs PDF

keep the uneducated, the poor, and minorities in jail just so that they can make a little more profit.

One might see these statistics and wonder what can be done, but the solutions are clear: make sure our children are valued and cared for. This is not a simple task, but it *must* be accomplished. There are various programs that attempt to help the disadvantaged children in the country, but the Head Start program is probably the best known and most widely implemented. Started in 1965, Head Start has now grown into a 13 million children a year program.⁸ It is a widely supported program that enjoys great support not only from the public, but both the Democratic and Republican parties.

Despite its heavy support, the Head Start program has received much criticism throughout its 41 years of operation. One of the bigger arguments that opponents use is that Head Start is not well-funded and therefore cannot accomplish all that much.

While Head Start does not receive the funding it should, it has been shown to provide numerous benefits both in the short-term and long-term, of which will be discussed later.

Many opponents also say that the Head Start program is unable to deal with the main issue that affects at-risk children: home-life. Finally, Head Start has high turnover rates among its teachers and caregivers because of the low wages and difficult job. Despite

⁸ Washington, 3

these problems, Head Start has very powerful strengths that, if supplemented properly, can be immensely valuable to the children that need them the most.

Critics of the Head Start program mainly use the argument that it is ineffective at producing better test results in later grades. While testing is a huge part of education today, more and more educators are saying that testing isn't really the way to go. Many teachers now support the idea of a portfolio or some other way of evaluating a student's progress in school. What America needs is a value shift away from testing and a move to a more comprehensive way of analyzing how good a job schools do with our children. However, I question how important it really is how much better students do on testing; I prefer to focus on the societal benefits derived by the participants such as better healthcare and reduced crime statistics. Among Head Start's goals are "to guarantee children's physical well being, to aid their social-emotional development, to improve their mental processes and skills, to establish a pattern of success, to improve family relationships, to develop social responsibility, and to increase children's sense of self-worth and dignity."⁹ The last two are particularly important to me and the ideas presented in this paper. Students that feel responsible for their actions and recognize the value of their fellow person are going to be much less likely to commit a crime against one another if they learn early on.

⁹ Slavin, 149

The other goal of the Head Start program is to involve parents more in their children's education. This is vital to making education more equitable for at-risk students because parent involvement is shown to positively influence their child's school experience.¹⁰ Parental involvement, and to a slightly lesser extent community involvement, is of the utmost importance in reducing the crime rate in our country. An emphasis on the community in a student's early education leads them to be more responsible of the actions later in life. It is much easier for one to commit a crime against an unknown community member, but it is much harder to for one to commit a crime against somebody they know well. Head Start makes a big emphasis on this community involvement and I believe that a stronger effort by the program to incorporate the local community will have quite surprising results.

Head Start has been a wonderful tool for helping to close the achievement gap and bring about more racially-balanced economic demographics. In a study done by the U.S. Department of Education, researchers, "found that Head Start programs were more likely than other early childhood programs to provide comprehensive services such as health care and nutritious meals, and to involve parents in their children's learning."¹¹ Many researchers also give Head Start credit for promoting diversity and race relations. Washington writes, "Head Start has *always* been designed to be more

¹⁰ Barnett, 214-216

¹¹ Washington, 7

than preschool education...Head Start has provided millions of children with health care, nutritious meals, and social services.”¹² What is needed is increased funding in order to create an even stronger system that can help to further its goals of providing an equal starting ground for all students in America.

In our country, our policies’ successes are not limited by our collective creativity, but by our wallets. Programs, such as Head Start, cannot succeed in bringing about social change if they aren’t funded properly. Head Start currently has a budget around one billion dollars a year and over 400,000 children use the program.¹³ While this budget might seem quite large, I argue that increased funding will decrease crime and the need for increasingly larger prison budgets.

More money can close the gap between underprivileged students and those who are well-off. The argument that more money doesn’t fix the problem doesn’t really apply to my situation because I argue for *drastic* increases in Head Start’s budget and *drastic* cutbacks in a state’s prison budget. Additional funding could allow for more staff and more educated staff that could spend increased time with children to help them prepare for school.

Our nation continues to suffer on a daily basis from the flaws of the correctional system and the lack of funding in our public education system. As a country, we have

¹² Washington, 8

¹³ Slavin, 150

the highest incarceration rate in the world in addition to the largest prison population in the world. We increasingly put more non-violent offenders, many of them minorities serving drug charges, into overcrowded prisons which seem to foster more crime and increased violence by those locked up. This problem isn't getting any better, in fact its growing at a faster rate than ever before. What is to blame for such a disparity in socio-economic status between those who are criminals and those who are law-abiding citizens? I believe that public education is the great equalizer in which one can reach the majority of our nation. Through funding early education programs like Head Start, we can reverse the trend of minorities being much more likely to commit crime and go to jail. Head Start emphasizes helping at-risk students to get more equitable education, but more importantly, it emphasizes making its participants feel cared for and watched over. One particularly good example is the Perry Preschool Program which enjoyed much success in the 1980s. Slavin and his associates write, "In this program, it was precisely the medical and social goals that were met...studies show that by age nineteen, those students who attended the Perry Preschool Program were more likely to have finished high school, were dramatically less likely to have committed a crime, were less likely to be on welfare."¹⁴

¹⁴ Slavin, 149

I think Jaqueline Irvine writes it best, “Darius...is not likely to end up in a college or university. In fact, statistical data predict that Darius has a better chance of ending up in a state prison...taxpayers will spend approximately \$20,000 a year for his incarceration.”¹⁵ As you can see, this just doesn’t make any economic sense because Darius’s education at a state university would generally be about half the amount that it costs to imprison him. I believe that through increased funding of early education programs and the scaling back of prison funding, our country might see some *dramatic results*. If we are to succeed as a nation in an increasingly competitive world, we must seek to bring up the most unfortunate, the most overlooked so that we can be a society of educated citizens in a democracy that really works.

¹⁵ Letters to the Next President, 121

Bibliography (with Annotations)

Barnett, W. S., and Sarane S. Boocock, eds. Early Care and Education for Children in

Poverty. Albany: State University of New York P, 1998. This book confronts many of the practical problems facing early education and the impoverished students that it tries to help. Much detail is given to economics of programs and their cost-benefit analysis. This is a vital source for research on early education for poor urban children.

Braman, Donald. Doing Time on the Outside. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan P,

2004. This book is absolutely outstanding. It shows in-depth the effect that incarceration has on our society and on the family. It shows the tragedy that has become our justice system and the inequities that it fosters.

Cole, David. No Equal Justice. New York: The New P, 1999. Cole does a good job of

showing how minorities continue to suffer at the hands of an unjust justice system. He offers some very valid insights that will really stimulate discussion of these topics. He also covers the costs of inequality in our justice system.

Glickman, Carl, ed. Letters to the Next President. New York: Teachers College P, 2004.

The particular letter by Jaqueline Irvine is what I find to be most moving and inspiring. She writes bluntly that the children of inner-city Atlanta have a much

better chance of going to a state prison rather than a state university. She shows us why we all must fix such an unjust system.

Painter, Murphy J., comp. The War on Drugs and the Economics of Incarceration. 30 Oct. 2006

<<http://www.aspaonline.org/ethicscommunity/documents/War%20on%20Drugs%20and%20Economics.pdf>>. This was undoubtedly the most valuable resource that I had. It provided extensive data on the prison industry and the strong influence that it has on our government. It shows the strong ties between unjust policy and lobbying on behalf of prison companies and corporations. A must read for all those interested in the injustice of our justice system.

Slavin, Robert E., Nancy L. Karweit, and Nancy A. Madden. Effective Programs for Students At Risk. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1989. The authors of this book work hard to effectively show all sides to their arguments. Their penetrating research shows what works, what doesn't, and what needs more observation. This book presents more than just a few ideas on how we as a nation can help to make education more equitable.

Soder, Roger, ed. Democracy, Education, and the Schools. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., 1996. This book does a wonderful job of exploring democracy and

education. It provides insights on how we can better implement democracy in our schools and the positive benefit that it will have on our society.

Wagner, Peter, comp. Prison Policy Initiative. 30 Oct. 2006

<<http://www.prisonpolicy.org>>. This was my most useful resource for finding information on prisons and compiling relevant statistics. The Prison Policy Initiative is an organization that "documents the disastrous impact of mass incarceration on individuals, communities, and the national welfare." They work to influence policy on incarceration and the criminal justice system.

Washington, Valora, and Ura Bailey. Project Head Start. Vol. 38. New York: Garland

Inc., 1995. As the title implies, this book is concerned solely with the Head Start program. It outlines everything from concerns with the program to its benefits.

This book contains a wealth of knowledge on Head Start and was thus quite influential in my paper.

Additional Resources

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Hirsch, E D. The Schools We Need. New York: Anchor Books, 1996.

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Oakland: Institute for Contemporary Studies, 2002.