THE EFFECTIVENESS OF CORRECTIONAL REHABILITATION

Reconsidering the “Nothing Works” Debate

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From its inception in the 1820s, the American prison was meant to be more than a sturdy cage of high, thick, stone walls in which the wayward could be restrained. The prison’s founders called their invention a “penitentiary,” a label that embodied their optimism that this carefully planned social institution had the power to reform even the most wicked spirit (Rothman, 1971).

For much of the past century and a half, faith in the prison’s curative powers showed a remarkable durability. To be sure, the bleak, if not inhumane, realities of institutional life often made it difficult to believe that existing prisons were improving their charges. Even so, most “en-

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lightened" commentators agreed that rehabilitation should be the over-riding goal of incarceration. Toby's 1964 review of leading criminology texts, for example, led him to conclude that "students reading these textbooks might infer that punishment is a vestigial carryover of a barbaric past and will disappear as humanitarianism and rationality spread" (1964: 332). Other commentators echoed this observation in 1971, when they noted that "the treatment approach receives nearly unanimous support from those working in the field of criminal justice" (American Friends Service Committee Working Party, 1971:83).

By the end of the 1970s, however, this consensus on the purpose of imprisonment had shattered. Suddenly, it seemed, many within the criminological community—scholars, policymakers, and even some practitioners—changed their minds: It was now fashionable to reject the idea that prisons could transform lawbreakers into lawabiders. This reversal of sentiments has its underlying causes (as we shall see), but on the surface it was ostensibly based on good scientific reasoning: Evaluation studies showed that correctional treatment did not work. "In the absence of any strong evidence in favor of the success of rehabilitative programs," Conrad (1973:209) concluded, "it is not possible to continue the justification of policy decisions in corrections on the supposition that such programs achieve rehabilitative objectives."

Although not willing to dismiss fully the criticisms leveled at correctional treatment, we argue for a reconsideration of this pervasive belief among criminologists that "rehabilitation doesn't work." We begin by suggesting that the rejection of rehabilitation has less to do with a careful reading of the empirical literature and more to do with changes in the social fabric that triggered a corresponding shift in thinking about corrections. We then turn to the growing body of research demonstrating the effectiveness of correctional programs and highlight the most prominent characteristics of successful intervention strategies. This discussion is followed by an assessment of the widely held assumption that citizens endorse a purely punitive or "get tough" approach to corrections. Contrary to what most commentators have declared, the data show, we believe, that the prevailing ideological context is favorable to the implementation of effective treatment programs.

1. THE "NOTHING WORKS" DEBATE

1.1. The Martinson Phenomenon

In 1974, Robert Martinson published in The Public Interest "What Works?—Questions and Answers About Prison Reform"—an article