

What is a Community Prison?

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This article originally appeared in the September 1965 Federal Probation and is reproduced by permission of the Editor. It is based on remarks made by Mr. Gill at the Massachusetts Correctional Institution (formerly the Norfolk Prison Colony), Norfolk, Mass., February 27, 1964, subsequent to the erection in the Administration Building there of a bronze plaque which reads as follows: "In recognition of the establishment at Norfolk, Massachusetts, of the first Community Prison for Men in the United States under the leadership of Howard B. Gill, Superintendent, 1927-34".

IN HIS BOOK entitled **The Prison Community* Donald Clemmer has described life in a typical state prison of the traditional Auburn type. This is a type which I have called massive, medieval, monastic, monolithic, monumental, monkey-cage monstrosities. Nevertheless, in such prisons one finds many of the characteristics of any community. Indeed, Clemmer points out how the prison culture in such institutions is very similar to the culture outside the prison.

Both the traditional Auburn type

prison and free society have customs, laws, beliefs. Both contain lively ingredients of conflict. Both have what sociologists call accommodation and assimilation. Both have systems of communication. Both have their social classes and their primary and semi-primary groups. Both have leadership.

PRISON CULTURE

Unfortunately, however, the prison culture presented by Clemmer, as found in many traditional prisons, is not a healthy culture. Its customs, laws and beliefs are more often against progress and toward destruction. Its conflict is bitter and unsportsmanlike rather than constructive. Its assimilation

*Donald Clemmer, *The Prison Community*. Boston: Christopher Publishing House, 1940; New York: Reinhardt and Co., Inc., revised 1958.

is deadening rather than harmonising. Its communication is one-sided. Its social classes and groups are essentially criminal. Its leadership is too often that of the worst rather than the best. It leads not to "reconstruction" but, as Clemmer points out, to "prisonisation".

Beyond all this, such prison culture is sadly lacking in certain essentials which make for a healthy culture. There is little or no innovation; no experimentation. Let well enough alone, don't rock the boat, are the orders of the day. Cross fertilisation between criminal and non-criminal is frowned on by both sides. Hence there is no creative synthesis in the meeting of opposites toward a better understanding; there is no "common ground".

Prison culture, as described by Clemmer, is a false culture, a pseudoculture. Exposed to such a culture, men leave prison worse than when they enter.

The fundamental concept of a "community prison" is just the opposite of the traditional prison. It is not built on the principle of mass housing, mass feeding, mass recreation, or mass anything. It avoids medieval and monastic characteristics. It eschews cells and isolation. It does not favour the silent system and non-communication, or solitary meditation on sin and guilt. It substitutes diversity and variation for monolithic structures and regimentation. It seems to reflect ordinary living conditions

rather than monumental designs. It abhors monkey-cages or similar monstrosities so dear to the hearts of mechanically minded "prison construction specialists".

What, then, are the essentials of a community prison?

FOUR ESSENTIALS

There are at least four basic essentials which are characteristic of a community prison.

1. *Normalcy* as it has to do with the interpersonal relationship between officials and staff, with the nature of structures in the institution, with all institutional activities, with rules and regulations, and with the general overall climate of the institution.

2. *Small group principle* as this applies to living quarters, dining, bathing, work programme, and leisure-time activities, including hobbies, athletics and entertainment, visiting, religious services, and medical care.

3. *Inmate participation* based on joint action and joint responsibility for all institution activities except discipline, parole, finances, and similar official administrative actions.

4. *Community contacts* including bringing the outside community into the prison and taking the inmate to the outside community in all reasonable ways possible.

Such essentials are unique to community prisons. They are established on the general principle

that the most effective means of reconstructing the lives of men who have had difficulty in adjusting to community life in a free society, is to have them live for a time in a supervised community under as nearly normal conditions as possible and practicable.

NORMAL RELATIONSHIPS

In a community prison every effort is made by both officials and inmates to establish a normal culture through normal relationships between all officials and all inmates. Officials and inmates who cannot establish such normal relationships do not belong in a community prison. This was one of the first lessons learned in the early days of Norfolk.

In a community prison, officials live, work and play with inmates in a friendly, co-operative relationship. Even the uniformed officers whose duty it is to prevent escapes, control contraband, and maintain order, are regarded as normal policemen of the community as in any outside society.

The structure of the community prison is as nearly like that of the outside community as possible. Living quarters have rooms not cells, with baths and recreation rooms and dining rooms for "family" living. Buildings are varied and separated, not monotonously monolithic, factory or fortress-like structures. As in a normal community, there are in addition to such living quarters,

a city hall, a police station, a gaol, a hospital, a school and library, a civic centre, a chapel, and industrial buildings of characteristic type. Play spaces are abundant. Grassy lawns and flowers are for the inmates and not just for visiting firemen. Only the wall is prison-like—and even that can be reduced to background rather than dominating the whole.

Activities in a community prison always approach the normal. Men go to or from work or other activities, singly or in twos and threes as in any community. Any legitimate activity which a man would have in his own home or neighbourhood is welcome in a community prison.

Rules and regulations are normal. Gone are the petty, harassing prison rules. Actually there are only two fundamental prison rules in a community prison: you can't go away, and you can't have contraband. All else are regulations relating to routine procedures such as are necessary in any society where people must live and work together. The two fundamental rules are not debatable. On the other hand, any regulation is subject to discussion and modification at any time. Of course, there are laws against disorderly conduct, fighting, stealing, sex deviations, gambling, drugs, etc., which are applicable to any community as well as a community prison, but

these are not peculiar to a prison.

The general climate of a community prison is also normal. Whereas the climate, in a traditional prison is autocratic and no one but the guards can offer a suggestion, in the community prison suggestions from the inmates are welcome even if they are not always adopted. In the traditional prison, inmates are usually deprived of all responsibility; in the community prison inmate responsibility is a recognised part of the programme. In the community prison there are more "do's" than "don'ts" and meritorious activities are more often recorded than disciplinary action. Instead of merely "doing your own time", in the community prison inmates can help the other fellow. Instead of "treating everybody alike", the community prison recognises that each man's needs are different. Diversity replaces uniformity; variety is substituted for monotony. Subservience is discouraged and men are encouraged to stand on their own feet. In place of deprivation, enrichment in living is the goal. Individual problem-solving takes precedence over "programmes of rehabilitation", but acculturation to the society to which a man will return is essential. The principal question to be resolved in any difference of opinion is: is it normal?

SMALL GROUP PRINCIPLE

Second, a community prison comes as close as possible to having men live in small "families". In the normal community, the family is the social unit of society. The cell house with hundreds and sometimes a thousand inmates in a single building is replaced with small groups of 50, and even these can be further divided into units of 10, 15, 25. Instead of a big central dining room, each group of 50 men is served from a small service unit making possible many home-like items, and the inmates eat at four-men tables where normal social interchange is possible. Instead of a central bath-house (as in the old traditional prison), each small unit has its own bathroom. The family group has its own living room and its own hobby shop.

Even recreation is carried on in many areas. At Norfolk there are 14 such areas instead of one massive recreation yard where inmates mill around aimlessly or sit on bleachers watching a few men play. Also at Norfolk, the assembly hall is purposely designed to accommodate only half the maximum population so that never can a mass congregation of all inmates be possible. A small chapel provides for intimate religious services. Visiting is designed to be held "family style"—a few groups

at a time. Thus, the small group principle is basic to a community type prison even though it poses some problems not always easy to solve.

INMATE PARTICIPATION

A third essential of a community prison is the participation of responsible inmates in the development and operation of the activities of the institution. It started at Norfolk when a group of inmates selected by inmates agreed to be responsible for escapes and for turning in contraband. It went on to develop a successful work programme through a joint committee of construction engineers and inmate leaders. It expanded further until there were similar joint committees of inmates and officers developing and operating sports, entertainment, education and library, home and employment, hobbies, family welfare, commissary, food service, maintenance, medical care, orientation (of new inmates), "The Colony". Each house had its joint house committee consisting of two officers and two inmates, and each house unit held a weekly meeting with its house officers to consider problems and suggestions for the good of all.

This was not play-acting or a "company union" in which the officers pulled the strings while the inmates went through the motions

of self-government. Indeed it was never intended to be self-government. Nor was it a system whereby an inmate advisory committee and the warden got together to tell the officers and staff how to run the prison. The Norfolk Plan was based on the principle of joint participation of groups of inmates and officers chosen from time to time to take joint responsibility for institution activities and report to the warden and his staff their joint recommendations for the welfare of all. The result was a healthy cross-fertilisation and creative synthesis which produced sound leadership and an enriched programme of community living. It produced civic responsibility on the part of both inmates and officers.

COMMUNITY CONTACTS

Finally, the community prison is built on the principle that contact between the outside community and the prison community is essential to carry on a programme of inmate reconstruction. In the old days what went on in a prison beyond the front office was nobody's business but the warden's. In the community prison it is axiomatic that the outside community shall be invited to participate in as many activities of the institution as possible. Every opportunity is taken to bring the outside community into the prison

not only on national and other holidays such as Christmas, New Year's, Patriots Day, Memorial Day, Fourth of July, Labor Day, Columbus Day, Veterans Day, Thanksgiving, but also as an exchange in athletics, entertainment, civic lectures, debates, etc., at any time. The fellowship programme with its fine group of outmates is much like the original Friends of Norfolk and the sponsorship programme they established.

The corollary of bringing the community into the prison is, of course, to take the inmate to the community. Until recently this has remained chiefly a hope for the future. During the past 10 years, however, this has become a reality in many states and some countries. Beginning in Wisconsin, "work release" (or what I first called "social servitude" in the 1930's) has been adopted in at least 17 states including Wisconsin, West Virginia, California, Idaho, North Carolina, Minnesota, North Dakota, Wyoming, Montana, Oregon, Illinois, Washington, Missouri, Michigan, Maryland, Indiana. By such a programme inmates who have shown evidence of "reconstruction" may live in special units in the prison or in "halfway houses" and be allowed to work in the community earning their own board and keep, supporting their own families, and saving up against the day of parole. Such

opportunity to meet everyday family and other problems will test a man's ability to maintain a law-abiding life under almost normal conditions.

This is the "wave of the future" in corrections in the United States today, and the community prison is the most likely source of candidates for such a programme.

CONCLUSION

Other states have built or are building community prisons. Indeed while Norfolk was being built, community type correctional institutions for youthful offenders were being built in New Jersey and Missouri, and even as far away as Germany and Russia. Now California, Wisconsin, and the Federal Bureau of Prisons are following suit. There were several community type institutions for women even before Norfolk was built such as the Federal Reformatory for Women at Alderson, West Virginia.

When the Wessell Committee made its report on corrections in Massachusetts several years ago, one of its recommendations was that Norfolk should re-establish its original programme. It is evident that under the present administration this is what is happening. At any rate, now in the 1960's, over 30 years after the Norfolk Plan was first established, Massachusetts finds itself in the forefront of modern corrections with a truly community prison.