

Culture Proposal #4

Creating a 40-Hour Work Week for Prisoners

In 1988, there were 700,000 people in state and federal prisons. In 2008, 700,000 people will be released from prison. Most likely, a majority of those leaving prison will commit more crimes, cause more problems for their communities, and cost taxpayers more money when they return to prison. Today, the typical prisoner spends most of his or her time in a “high level of idleness.” We must establish a 40-Hour Work Week for prisoners—replacing idleness with productivity, education, personal responsibility, and self-improvement—so that they become productive members of their community upon release.

THE PROBLEM

Prison does not make prisoners accountable for a productive reentry back into their communities

Twenty years ago, fewer than 700,000 people constituted the populations of the entire state and federal prison system. Next year, 700,000 people will be *released* from prison, and 3.5 million will be released over the next five years.¹

They will mostly return to their communities with few marketable skills, barren job prospects, inferior education, and glaring mental health and drug problems. We need a new strategy that ends the prison revolving door, saves taxpayer dollars, and makes communities safe.

Prison time is mostly idle time.

Although the typical prisoner has enormous educational, mental health, substance abuse, family, and social deficits, prisoners spend most of their time in a “high level of idleness,” according to Jeremy Travis, a former director of the National Institute of Justice.²

Only 52% of state prisoners reported taking any education courses at all, despite the fact that 68% lack a high school diploma.³ Although 53% of state prisoners are dependent on drugs, only four in ten prisoners with drug addiction problems participated in substance abuse treatment programs during their incarceration.⁴ And while one-third of state prisoners had “major depression or mania symptoms” and another eighth had psychotic disorders, only one in three prisoners diagnosed with mental health problems participated in any treatment programs at all while incarcerated.⁵ Only a third of state prisoners participate in any vocational education programs at any time during their confinement, and only 48% of able prisoners held work assignments.⁶

The current approach to incarceration does not teach prisoners to be productive members of society.

A 2002 Bureau of Justice Statistics study found that nearly two-thirds of reentering prisoners were rearrested within three years of their release and over half returned to prison over the same time frame.⁷ Assuming those percentages remain constant, that means that over the next five years, 2.5 million ex-offenders will be rearrested and 1.8 million will be returned to prison. According to projections, this group of individuals alone will be responsible for 9.5 million new crimes, including 1.3 million violent crimes, by 2013.⁸ At a cost of between \$25,000 and \$30,000 to house each prisoner, our revolving door prison system is not making us safer or saving the taxpayers any money.

Americans are ready for a results-oriented solution to crime that focuses on personal responsibility.

A majority of Americans support robust anti-crime initiatives as long as they believe that those programs will achieve actual results. They also believe that initiatives that embody the concept of personal responsibility and focus on changing individual behavior will achieve the desired results.

Americans support rehabilitation programs for prisoners, but their support is based less on what they view as a moral obligation for the prison population than what they think would result in reduced crime. For example, support for prison rehabilitation programs jumps 35-points (from 55% to 90%) when rehabilitation is defined as a requirement of the prison population, as opposed to a benefit for the prison population.

By a margin of 90-6%, Americans said they were more likely to support a candidate who said: *"Prisoners should be forced to work, get an education, and learn skills because they need to be productive when they get out."*⁹

THE SOLUTION

Creating a 40-Hour Work Week program for prisoners

Congress should pass legislation to create a pilot program to help state and local corrections agencies finance the development of a 40-Hour Work Week curriculum of activities for prisoners that promotes responsibility, education, family, work, faith, sobriety, and parenthood.

The 40-Hour Work Week would create an individualized curriculum to address each prisoner's educational, mental health, substance abuse, family, and social deficits.

Based on an individualized assessment of their education, skills, and history, a curriculum should be developed for each prisoner to address barriers to success and gain new skills that help them succeed and cope once they return home. The curriculum should be composed of a combination of elements, including:

- Literacy Training
- Acquiring a GED (Prisoners lacking a high school degree should be required to take classes unless mentally or physically unfit.)
- Vocational Education
- Earning a two-year or College Degree
- Special Education
- Mental Health Counseling
- Anger Management Counseling
- Substance Abuse Treatment and Counseling
- Family Counseling and Parenthood Training
- Job and Skills Training
- Victim Restitution
- Working a “Job” in the Prison

The 40-Hour Work Week would provide a practical solution that emphasizes personal responsibility.

Prisoners would be required to spend as much time on their curriculum as civilians do at work—40 hours a week. This requirement would both cut down on the amount of time prisoners spend idle and prepare prisoners to undertake a productive and responsible routine when they return to their communities.

The 40-Hour Work Week would make participation a requirement, not an option.

For prisoners within three years of their release date, participation in the 40-Hour Work Week program would be mandatory. Because the 40-Hour Work Week program makes participation a requirement rather than an option, it would force prisoners to take personal responsibility for their own future—and for being productive rather than destructive members of their community.

The 40-Hour Work Week would benefit the entire community.

The 40-Hour Work Week program would instill a strict work ethic that requires prisoners to take responsibility for becoming productive members of society. The program would also create a safer environment for correctional officers, volunteers, and other prisoners—encouraging community and faith-based organizations to help provide and administer programs within their local correctional facilities.

THE ROLLOUT

Ideas for launching and publicizing a 40-Hour Work Week

- **Hold a press conference in front of a local police department or federal law enforcement building.**
- **Prepare a short report and/or visual on crime rates in the state or region using readily attainable public data.**

- **Make a poster with the current correctional programs and recidivism rates in the state, again using readily attainable public data.**
- **If possible, for added exposure, pick a day to hold the event that correlates with a crime-related event in your community, in order to create a news hook.**

CRITIQUES & RESPONSES

Creating a 40-Hour Work Week to promote personal responsibility

The crime rate is going down.

The dramatic reduction in crime that we've experienced has stopped. In two of the past three years, the rate for violent crime has gone up—the first time that has occurred since 1992. With the prison population reaching unprecedented heights, a record number of prisoners will be released into the community in the next five years—setting the stage for a major increase in crime if they merely match past rates of recidivism.

It's too expensive.

We spend between \$25,000 and \$30,000 for each prisoner for each year that they are in prison. Incarceration is incredibly expensive.¹⁰

By contrast, a pilot program would expend minimal federal funds while allowing state and local corrections agencies to implement varied curricula—providing insight into the “best practices” and helping other states and localities to pinpoint the most efficient and effective means to lower rates of recidivism. Compared with the cost of incarcerating re-offenders, the 40-Hour Work Week is a bargain—not to mention a better investment.

Federal funds should be dedicated to punishing offenders, not coddling them.

The 40-Hour Work Week would be a requirement of incarceration, not a perk. By turning idleness into productivity, prisoners would be forced to contribute to society, beginning preparation for their reentry while they are still behind bars, instead of wasting that time and then taxing public resources later.

The Second Chance Act, signed into law this year by President Bush, already provides grants for prisoner reentry services, so further legislation is unnecessary.

The *Second Chance Act* focuses on reintegration services for prisoners who have already been or are about to be released.¹¹ A 40-Hour Work Week program would complement the *Second Chance Act* by requiring prisoners to undertake healthy and productive activities while they are still incarcerated, placing an emphasis on personal responsibility and a strong work ethic during the entirety of their sentence.

Endnotes

¹ Approximately 700,000 people will be released from state and federal prison in 2008, while state and federal prisons housed just over 600,000 prisoners in 1988. *Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics*, Table 6.28.2005, University of Albany: <http://www.albany.edu/sourcebook/pdf/t6282005.pdf>.

² Jeremy Travis, *But They All Come Back*, Urban Institute Press, 2005: page 161.

³ Caroline Wolf Harlow, PhD, *Education and Correctional Populations*, Bureau of Justice Statistics Data, 2003.

⁴ *Special Report—Drug Use and Dependence, State and Federal Prisoners*, 2004, Bureau of Justice Statistics, October 2006.

⁵ *Special Report—Mental Health Problems and Jail Inmates*, Bureau of Justice Statistics, September 2006.

⁶ Rob Atkinson and Knut Rostad, *Can Inmates Become an Integral Part of the US Workforce?*, Reentry Policy Council, 2003.

⁷ A 2002 Bureau of Justice Statistics study tracked over 200,000 state prisoners released in 1994 and found that within three years of release, law enforcement rearrested 67.5% of these individuals and 51.8% returned to prison. *Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 1994*, Bureau of Justice Statistics, June 2002.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Cooper and Secrest, Survey of 1,139 likely voters, December 15-19, 2007.

¹⁰ James J. Stephan, *State Prison Expenditures- 2001*, Bureau of Justice Special Report: <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/spe01.pdf>. In 2001, the average cost of housing a prisoner was \$22,632. Factoring for inflation, the average rises to approximately \$27,000. Prisoner housing costs also vary greatly between states, for example, the average cost of housing a prisoner in California costs over \$43,000 versus approximately \$23,000 in Utah. Andy Furillo, "Housing costs still rising- at state prisons," *Sacramento Bee*, February 2, 2007; Utah Department of Corrections, "Frequently Asked Questions": <http://corrections.utah.gov/faq.html>.

¹¹ Second Chance Act of 2007: Community Safety Through Recidivism Prevention, Pub. L. no. 110-199, 122 Stat 657 (2008).