

Other worrisome practices plague the U.S. corrections system. Health care in some prison systems is appallingly bad, especially for the mentally ill. In California, for example, the shockingly deficient health care for prisoners ended in a recent federal appellate court ruling that ordered the state to reduce institutional crowding by releasing at least 40,000 people.²⁶ Routinely, correctional programs emphasize being tough and providing close surveillance over providing support and promoting change. A nationwide spate of laws demonizes sex offenders irrationally and contributes to fear and retributive actions that are counterproductive in terms of correctional aims and democratic values. The growth of surveillance alone is cause for concern.

The social costs of the penal system have been borne most substantially by minority communities that already struggle with poverty and other forms of disadvantage. Among them are broken families, deteriorated health, teenage pregnancies, weakened labor markets, juvenile delinquency, and even more crime. As a nation committed to basic ideas of social justice, these consequences of a burgeoning corrections system must concern us (see Chapters 19 and 21). The corrections system we have built does not highlight what is best about the American heritage: optimism, entrepreneurial spirit, and a belief in the possibilities that arise when people are allowed to pursue their dreams. There are good reasons why so many of the Western democracies around the world look elsewhere for new horizons in correctional practice.

The next generation of correctional leaders can aim the sights of the American corrections system toward higher aspirations. Part of this can be accomplished by molding a smarter correctional system, emphasizing the kinds of strategies that good studies tell us will bear fruit and turning away from approaches that do not. But part of this will just as surely be about basic values. The challenge facing us all is how to articulate those values in a compelling way—how to clarify what corrections is all about in language and imagery that make us, once again, a beacon of freedom and justice for the world to see.

Changing Corrections: A Final View

Throughout this book we have portrayed corrections as a system buffeted by its environment, changing yet unchanging. External pressures arise to move correctional leadership in one direction, only to be replaced by counterpressures. One state abolishes parole releases; another reinstates early-release mechanisms. One prison reduces its treatment programs; another adds professional counseling staff. The image is one of an unplanned, reactive management style rather than a planned, proactive attempt to lead corrections down a path of gradual improvement (see “Myths in Corrections”).

Although this image is largely accurate, it is also changing, partly because corrections continues to develop. Several forces contribute to this change—predominantly, professional associations and government agencies. Perhaps the greatest influence is exercised by the National Institute of Corrections (NIC), a division of the Federal Bureau of Prisons in the Department of Justice. The NIC has served as (1) a national clearinghouse of information about correctional practices, (2) a source of technical assistance to local and state correctional agencies that wish to upgrade their practices, and (3) a training operation, both basic and advanced, open to any correctional employee. The NIC has become to corrections what the FBI is to law enforcement: a strong force for professional standards, policy and procedural improvement, and general development of the field.

Similarly, the American Correctional Association (ACA) has become an active lobbyist for the field. A quarter-century ago, it promulgated a set of national standards for correctional practices in jails, prisons, and field services. Correctional agencies that meet these standards may be accredited, much as universities are accredited by outside agencies. Although the ACA has faced its share of criticism, its work indicates the kind of ground-level upgrading (APPA) serves a function similar to that of the ACA but is focused on field services. It has only recently begun a highly visible national campaign to organize the profession and to develop an improved professional consciousness of the importance of field services in probation and parole.

MYTHS in Corrections

Can Corrections Change?

THE MYTH: The corrections system is too buffeted by political and social forces to be able to change.

THE REALITY: The corrections system changes when people with new vision devote themselves to improving it.

sources: Three hundred years of history and the present realities described in this book.