IT’S ALL IN HOW WE LOOK AT IT

How are things different from before the pandemic? Our answer: they are the same, but worse—less equal, more discriminatory. And that comes from the basic rule regarding how things are set up in this country: for inequality. Now, more than ever before. The rich are richer, the poor are poorer; those few who have had power before, now have more power over the lives of the rest of us. And we have it drummed into us to accept things as they are, that they are the fault of the “have nots” ourselves. That this is how these are and should be. Although we are occasionally encouraged to work to change glaring injustices minimally.

Some examples: The first is one almost of our readers have direct experience of: the police, court and penal system. We are constantly told that it exists to make our lives safer. The evidence, of course, does not bear this out. We are told, directly or indirectly, that our “problems” of inequality and danger come from poor people and people of color. The facts do not confirm this. We are told that the “solution” to these “problems” is, essentially, more punishment.

Even those advocating present policies and practices do not act in a way that shows they believe in the work they do. Example: if arresting, prosecuting and incarcerating people (overwhelmingly those with no power) makes us safer, how come there is a lack by those in power to release from custody those who have been “made safer” by being in the hands of authorities for years? Somehow, those who say they believe in long prison sentences don’t act in a way that reflects they actually believe in doing so makes the lives of others “safer.” Punishment, of course, cannot undo anything that has already been done. We need to reduce the conditions that produce harmful behavior.

And, in the meantime, treating people badly, as people locked up overwhelmingly are, produces both anger and despair in many and does not result in redistribution of power or opportunity or skills that those subjected to imprisonment receive. Guess what? Things don’t change. They are not “supposed” to. As we know, many, released from imprisonment, are returned. We see the same beliefs, behaviors and results in the functioning of other major institutions whose operation affect us directly. Two examples follow:

School systems. We believe they are in fact is set up to keep things as they are. Poor people get ineffective educational systems, rich ones get ones that keep them in power. Do we really have to accept the elementary school statistics that show, year after year, that low income kids CAN’T learn to read and do arithmetic? We don’t believe it. Statistically, schools are not set up to be effective for all. Their funding bases, after all, are property taxes. What poor children, especially those of color, are successfully prepared to do is to fail in ways that help to keep them at the bottom of an entrenched system of rewards and “success” — and punishment and deprivation.

The medical system. We do not have anything that could be accurately called a “public health care system” — as the disastrous and ongoing Covid pandemic management has so repeatedly and thoroughly demonstrated. We have not consistently engaged in the most basic — and essentially free — public health measures to protect ourselves and others: mask wearing and social distancing. No one can deny or harm others by doing or employing them. We are repeatedly told to “follow the science” and all the while the “science” appears to keep changing. So contradictory and incomplete have been our tactics and strategies that it was even startling to hear on the radio recently: “you have to be careful giving any vaccine until you’re sure the benefits outweigh the risks.” And we ask again who suffers the most from this approach? People of color and other poor people. For a while, we were thanking those were called “essential workers.” But those folks now seem to have disappeared.

Until we effectively work together to drastically decrease societal inequality and racism, we will not achieve the changes needed to benefit the majority of us. And the changes we need are big indeed.
MORE LIFE-WITHOUT-PAROLE SENTENCES

Usually referred to as “LWOP,” such sentences are becoming increasingly common. Although in fact “death sentences,” they are not execution sentences. Ironically, the people facing such sentences are entitled to only a fraction of the legal resources of those eligible for an execution sentence.

Were prosecutors to opt for charges with an execution sentence possible, the defendant would be guaranteed a pair of lawyers whose expertise in such “capital cases” had been vetted by a court-appointed screening committee. The court would pay for an investigator and a mental health expert. Under national legal guidelines, the defense attorneys would have a special obligation to aggressively assert every possible defense argument.

LWOP trials cost thousands of dollars less than execution-possible cases. They are shorter, involve fewer lawyers, allow limited appeals and often result in plea deals before trial. Support for execution sentences is waning. Execution sentences were down to 18 last year as prosecutors went after LWOPs instead. Jurors seem to be less squeamish about locking people up for the rest of their lives than having them killed outright. Nationally, the total number of people on death rows is about 2,500. Those with LWOP sentences number approximately 56,000 people, up 66% from 2003.

Half the people doing LWOP are in just five states: California, Florida, Louisiana, Michigan and Pennsylvania. Alaska is the only state without an LWOP sentence. OVER 60% OF PEOPLE WITH LWOP SENTENCES ARE BLACK.

To come at this tragedy from a slightly different direction, the number of people with LWOP sentences in the United States today is more than the total number of people imprisoned in 1970: 203,000. LWOP sentences are shunned by other industrialized nations. The European Court of Human Rights has substantially eliminated LWOP in its member nations.

Meanwhile, people of color make up two-thirds of those sentenced to LWOP in the United States. One-fifth of Black prisoners are condemned to such life sentences. It is obvious that the creation of anything approaching a “more fair and just system” depends on ending all such extreme penalties. There are increasing calls to limit sentences to a maximum of 20 years.

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