

Fight crime with education, not prison

By Lorenn Walker and Kat Brady

Imprisonment does not prevent crime. We have spent decades and billions of dollars using imprisonment to make our community safe, and it has failed miserably.

So, much as we love Lee Cataluna, she is wrong that Oahu needs “prison facilities where there’s room for more because clearly, there are people out there who should be in there” (“Who is going to clean up criminal activity on Oahu?” Nov. 29).

After 25 years of consistently declining crime rates, the research and data show that the impact of incarceration on crime is limited and has been diminishing for several years. Increased incarceration has no effect on violent crime, and may actually lead to higher crime rates when incarceration is concentrated in certain communities.

It is horrendous to be the victim of a violent crime, as I (Lorenn Walker) know from being assaulted and almost murdered in my youth. Certainly, some people are clearly dangerous and must be isolated, but that number is a small segment of the over 5,000 people Hawaii currently incarcerates.

The federal government became a major incarcerator in the 1990s, and today, the United States has the highest rate of imprisonment in the world. If Hawaii were a country, its incarceration rate would place it in the top 20th percentile of incarcerators, ahead of the United Kingdom, Portugal, Canada and France.

The U.S. spent \$33 billion on incarceration in 2000 for the same level of public safety it achieved in 1975 for \$7.4 billion. The U.S. prison industry grew from about \$7 billion in 1980 to nearly \$80 billion in 2010.

In Hawaii, the cost of incarceration has grown from about \$107 million in 2003 to \$230 million today. Since 1978, Hawaii’s total incarcerated population increased 700%, and since 1980, the number of incarcerated women has increased over 1,888%.

Incarceration is known as “crime college” because people learn about committing more crimes in prison. We need to spend our resources on preventing crime, not manufacturing criminals. Punishing someone for violent behavior will not make them a kinder and more peaceful person.

Hawaii used to be a model for criminal rehabilitation. In 1973, during Russ Takaki’s tenure with the parole board, Hawaii had an average 5% rate of repeat crime, unlike the 50% we suffer today. Takaki used kindness and compassion to help individuals.

Letter-writer Bill Leary likes Cataluna’s imprisonment idea (“Dangerous criminals shouldn’t walk streets,” Letters, Star-Advertiser, Dec. 2). He suggests: “It would be great if we could figure out a way to protect the public without incarceration, but until we do, we need to keep these criminals off the street to ensure public safety.”

Actually we do know how to prevent criminality: education. Education can increase good behavior. The fact that the average grade level for incarcerated people in Hawaii is only the sixth-grade shows education must be addressed to prevent crime. Our youth must be educated. Schools, as well as our justice system, should implement restorative justice, which has been shown to especially reduce serious and violent crimes.

We have been providing and studying restorative justice for 25 years in Hawaii. Our re-entry planning process helps reduce repeat crime and brings healing to families. The re-entry circle has been replicated in other states, countries, and has been piloted by the federal court in Honolulu.

Imprisonment does not prevent or reduce repeat crime. If it did, the United States and Hawaii would be relatively crime-free. We have tried incarceration for crime prevention and it doesn't work. It is well past time that we invested more in education and rehabilitation instead of incarceration.



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