

Blanket labels like ‘violent offender’ are misleading

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Violent offender is a term that elected officials, prison staff, and the news media use to scare the bajeebas out of society. All that’s required to slap this label on a person is one criminal conviction that may or may not have involved physical force.

It doesn’t matter how long ago the conviction or what the person’s pattern of behavior and character has been since. Once labeled a violent offender, always a violent offender—an irredeemable threat to all, an out-of-control, crazed monster no longer belonging to the human family.

While the Department of Corrections’ (DOC) mission is to reduce recidivism by promoting offender change, oftentimes the institution perpetuates and practices the false narrative that those labeled “violent offenders” are incapable of change. A prime example is the Minnesota Rehabilitation and Reinvestment Act, a bill submitted to the legislature this past March and backed by the DOC.

The bill creates a pathway for prisoners to receive an individualized assessment identifying their needs in order for the prison to effectively rehabilitate them. The bill also incentivizes prisoners to complete rehabilitative programming by reducing their prison sentences.

Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, the bill explicitly excluded “violent offenders” from not just the reduced prison sentence for completing programming, but they are also excluded from receiving an assessment to figure out how to best rehabilitate them.

Here’s an interesting and ironic fact the public may not be aware of: Many of the DOC’s rehabilitative programs are facilitated by—guess who—the prisoners labeled violent offenders. Funny how the DOC is willing to turn to so-called violent offenders to mentor and teach other prisoners how to be nonviolent, pro-social members of society, but then perpetuates a false narrative that a person convicted of a violent crime is some kind of Boogie Man.

I and many other prisoners convicted of a violent crime are often requested by DOC staff to facilitate numerous classes such as Critical Thinking, Building Character, Anger Management, Restorative Justice, Non-violent Communication, Alternatives to Violence and Domestic Violence Awareness.

We tutor G.E.D. students, art classes, and even mentor prisoners dealing with mental health issues. We model the behavior and belief systems we teach. It has become our way of life, evidenced by the last 15, 20, and sometimes 30 years of our pattern of behavior.

If you ask any former or current prisoner who changed their criminal thinking, I guarantee you that 90% will say it was because of the mentorship of fellow prisoners who are “lifers,” those serving a life sentence or more for arguably the most serious of violent crime—murder.

It’s not prison itself that makes society safe. It’s also the compassion, understanding, and non-judgmental mentorship from the so-called “violent offenders.”

People experience personal transformation when others treat them as people-in-process, humans full of potential that are not judged for the one bad thing they have done in life. The punishment of prison changes no one.

Obviously, not everyone convicted of a violent crime turns their life around before committing another violent crime. But it’s not hard to distinguish the majority that will not commit another violent crime. They exhibit a history of behavior that far outweighs whatever three seconds of their life they spent on one violent act, and they constantly inspire change in other prisoners.

Make no mistake, our criminal acts may have constituted just a smidgen of time and be decades behind us, but that doesn’t mean we don’t live with them in our hearts and minds every day and remember those we harmed.

It means that what's now behind us is the errant thinking and emotional volatility that led us to that poor decision. The fact that we remember the people we harmed and recognize their value every day is exactly why we commit to a life without violence.

The report "Still Life" by The Sentencing Project, a national nonprofit engaged in research and advocacy on criminal justice issues, noted that "there is a tendency to generalize the outcome of a single released prisoner who goes to commit a violent crime as indicative of all prisoners if they are given the chance. In reality, these tragic outcomes are rare and even more so among people serving life sentences despite the gravity of their original crime."

When considering criminal justice policies in the future, state officials, media, and prison officials must stop overgeneralizing people with blanket labels and start making space in society for people convicted of a violent crime whose pattern of behavior and mentorship reflects a pro-social belief system.

Because they themselves have transformed and have a desire to give back to the community, have learned to treat others based on their inherent value and potential, and are often credited by other prisoners as having been the influence to spark their change, people convicted of a violent crime are the real engines of rehabilitation in prison.

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