

Crime and Punishment



A group of tourists were once surprised to be given the following information by a Singaporean tour guide. He told them that in Singapore elementary school children are taken to see criminals in prison. Once the children see how terrible the conditions in the prison are, the guide said, they will be too frightened to ever commit crimes in the future. The strictness of the prisons in Singapore, he maintained helps to explain the country's very low crime rate. In this case, we can see how a strict prison system acts not only to punish criminals, but also how it acts as a deterrent to dissuade other people from committing crimes.

How about you? Are you a conservative who supports a strict prison system that punishes criminals? Or, are you a liberal who sees the criminal as a "victim" of social forces whom the prison system should reform or re-educate so that the prisoner can return to society?

The French philosopher Michel Foucault has written interestingly about crime and punishment. He has shown that in the West the way that prisoners are treated has changed over the centuries. At one time, prisoners were publicly punished or executed before crowds of people. Many of the people who witnessed these punishments saw them as a form of entertainment. Nowadays, when someone is executed, he or she is put to death by the authorities under conditions of great secrecy. This creates a strange situation in those countries which still maintain the death penalty. Although the death penalty is felt to be necessary, the authorities seem to be too embarrassed to execute people openly these days.

The question of the "rehabilitation" of criminals is also difficult. It has even been argued that the liberal idea of rehabilitation of criminals is actually an infringement of the prisoner's human rights. According to this argument, rehabilitation of a criminal in order to "brainwash" him or her into living in a law-abiding manner interferes with the person's right to decide for him or herself between right and wrong.

Those who have studied prison systems have offered us no convenient solutions to the problem of crime. However, they have proved that crime and its relationship to society is a more complex problem than we might have thought. Our concept of what constitutes "crime" and what constitutes "normal behavior" may have more to do with the culture or period in history we live in than with any more objective truth.

1. Do you think this is a good idea in Singapore?