

The Worst People on the Planet?

Are Americans the worst people on earth? Silly question, you say! Then why are more people locked up in jails and prisons here than anywhere else? Either many of our incarcerated should not be locked up, or other countries are letting their criminals off too easy, or we must have a lot more bad apples than other nations.

America leads not only in total numbers of incarcerated, but also – among major industrialized nations – in the proportion of citizens who are locked up. We have 751 people in prison or jail for every 100,000 in population. Russia comes in a distant second, with 627. No other major industrialized nation comes close.

If you think all those in America's jails and prisons are precisely the people who rightly belong there, then you must think that the crimes that got them there warrant such treatment, and you must regard the patterns of incarceration as appropriate reflections of our society's patterns of criminality. But do you really think that blacks *more* than whites, men *more* than women, and Americans *more* than the people of other nations – are not only criminal in their behavior but also deserving of incarceration?

The question is not whether differences exist in crime rates among different population groups. They obviously do. The question is whether the laws that determine what constitutes crime are just, and whether the resulting patterns of incarceration are just. In my view there is something fundamentally perverse and prejudicial about our laws and unjust about their application and prosecution.

Massive inequities surely exist in our justice system. I'll wager that these inequities are substantially perpetuated by attitudes about punishment that are deeply rooted in widely shared religious meaning systems. It seems that most Americans have little patience for forgiveness and redemption. We are more inclined to scapegoating, vengeance, and punishment. And we bolster our own sense of righteousness by attributing inferior moral standing to those who fail to conform to our dominant social value systems.

Our *blame and punishment society* hardly embodies a Christian view of the life, worth, and dignity of every other human being – no exceptions. Most citizens assiduously ignore all the many ways in which our whole society is implicated in the failings of its members. Eschewing responsibility for transforming how we deal with one another, we seek revenge and retribution rather than reform, restitution, rehabilitation, or reconciliation. Surely we can do better.

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