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Too Easy to Keep

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Too easy to keep

²*Too easy to keep: Life-sentenced prisoners and the future of mass incarceration* is a book written by Steve Herbert directing the much-needed attention towards the large and growing population of prisoners who are on a life sentence. Such inmates are neglected, and no attention is paid towards them. The book draws on an extensive interview with the prison staff and the lifers. The book explores the challenges that a life sentence poses to the inmates and the staff charged with caring for them. Many of the prisoners show resilience and craft lives of notable purpose. The 184-page book illustrates the harsh consequences of long sentences and demonstrates the need to reconsider the punishment policy.

The book has two dimensions. First, Herbert wants to pass the message that prisoners in life sentence should not remain in prison since quite a number of them have demonstrated through their daily lives that they are capable of assuming responsibility for their lives, well-adjusted and can fit in the community. The fact that they have become easy keepers means that they have been transformed and significantly need consideration for release. They are too "easy" and therefore do not deserve to be held in prison any longer.

Secondly, the book focuses on the political dynamics that confine too many people in jails. Various policies and cruel politics that drive them have led to an expanding population of life-sentenced inmates in the US. According to Herbert, such politics need to be reconsidered and changed. There were 206,206 prisoners serving a life sentence in the United States in 2016.

The author, Steve Herbert, is a professor at Mark Torrance and Department chair of law, societies, and justice. Is he fit to write the book? Well, Steve Herbert, who is also a Professor of Geography, has done a lot of research with the Los Angeles and the Seattle Police Departments. I

believe that Herbert is fit to write this book because, throughout his career, he has devoted a lot of research energy on exploring the link between control of space and the exercise of power especially in urban police departments. Herbert has also authored other books including *Policing space, citizens, Cops, and power* and *Banished* (together with Katherine Beckett). In his recent works *Too Easy to keep*, the author focuses on the realities of life-sentenced prisoners. Therefore, with the qualities described above, I think Herbert is fit to write this book.

Too easy to keep has four chapters, the first chapter is titled "Becoming Easy," the second chapter is "Being Easy Isn't Easy," the third chapter is entitled "when easy Becomes Hard" while the fourth and last chapter is entitled "Let's All be Easy." In the introduction of the book which Herbert dubs "The Easy Keeper," the author states that this phrase is used inside the prisons that house inmates serving life sentences (Herbert, 2019). The term is used by both the prisoners and prison staff. The author explains that this phrase describes a prison who is on a life sentence and who practices a steady daily routine with little or no disruption. These inmates, as described by one prison staff, do not break any rules. They are, therefore, easy to keep. Such prisoners go to school, do their jobs, and do not commit any infractions, they keep their cells tidy, and they follow the rules. In the introduction of the book, Herbert gives the statistics of prisoners serving a life sentence. He asserts that the number of such prisoners has quadrupled since 1984 (pg 5). Life without parole (LWOP) has become rampant in the United States for the punishment of murder and other high profile offenses. Using interview data from both prisoners and staff, the author empirically critiques life sentences.

Synopsis of the book

In chapter 1 of the book (Becoming Easy), the author gives stories of his interaction with some of the inmates and the occasions that led to their sentencing. One of the inmates called Leonard clubbed an elderly neighbor to death as part of a robbery. Leonard was 18 years at the time of the incident. He was found guilty of murder and sentenced to life imprisonment. At the time Herbert met him, he was 51, and in his 25th year of residence at the Washington State Reformatory. The inmate continues to give his tales of his life, admitting that he was selfish, which made him land in prison (Herbert, 2019).

In chapter two, the author gives the story of Melvin also serving her life sentence. Two of the hardest moments for Melvin was the death of both his parent. Chapter three (when easy becomes hard) and four (let's All Be Easy) continues with the interactions of Herbert with various prisoners. In the last chapter, it is the story of Edgar, who had earned his punishment through Washington's "three strikes, and you are out" policy. He described his life in prison as meaningless. These laws, also called permanent offender laws, are still part of the United States Justice Department since 1994. These laws require that two previous convictions plus a severe violent felony serve a mandatory life sentence. He devoted himself to art and spent most of his time crafting and pen and ink drawings of notable intricacy (Herbert, 2019).

From this book, it is clear that the author provokes lawmakers and policy implementers to have a second thought on life imprisonment without parole. It also challenges some of the laws in the American justice system such as "Three strikes and you are out." As described in the introduction part of the book, Herbert's central message is that many of the prisoners in life sentence should not remain in prison and the critique of the American justice system. Such

policies and politics have made it hard to keep prisoners who have reformed and who deserve release. Such politics, therefore, require reconsideration.

How the book contributes to our understanding of correctional systems and practices.

To understand how the book contributes to our understanding of correctional systems and practices, we have to understand the role of punishment and prison. The goals of punishment are retribution, deterrence of crime, and rehabilitation. Herbert's thoughts are measured concerning these goals and principles, and his sentiments are put to balance. Is he right or wrong? Do his ideas hold any water? Do his thoughts require reconsideration?

What are the goals of punishment?

One of the goals of punishment is that punishment should contribute to a reduction in crime. Does life sentence without parole achieve this goal? Well, a life sentence without parole does not give the offender time to reform thus does not contribute to the reduction of crime. This makes Herbert's sentiments worth consideration that such prisoners should be set free at one time. According to Appleton & Grover (2007), life imprisonment does not lead to a reduction in crime, and it can even be equated to capital punishment since both do not give the offender a chance to reform and come back to the society. Appleton & Grover (2007) assert that there is no ³evidence that capital punishment is a better deterrent to crime than life in prison. Both are equally ineffective. If this goal holds, then Herbert's sentiments are worth consideration, that since life imprisonment does not contribute to a reduction in crime, it is not logical to have it. We should only have those types of punishments that lead to a reduction in crime. According to the author, prisoners should be released after they have reformed, and according to him, the prisoners whom he has interacted with deserve this. He describes them as ones who are easy to keep. The

evidence he holds is that they attend to their duties, they go to school, do their jobs, and do not commit any infractions, they keep their cells tidy, and they follow the rules. His interpretation is that such felons have reformed and once taken back to the society, they will conform to the laws.

The second goal of punishment is that punishment should be economical (Appleton & Grover, 2007). Punishments should not waste valuable social resources in unnecessarily costly endeavors. Does life imprisonment without parole achieve this goal? The answer is no. This argument vindicates Herbert's ideas that life prisoners should, at one time, be released.

The other goal is that punishment should make convicted offenders better persons instead of leaving them the way they are or making them worse (Pettit & Western, 2004). This goal is not achieved by a life sentence without parole since there is no evidence of the convicts becoming good people. Life sentence does not allow the offenders to prove that they have reformed. Hebert believes that the people whom he has interacted with, have changed and have become better people and therefore deserve to be released.

Some principles hold as far as life sentence is concerned. First, the more severe a penalty is, the more critical it is that justice is administered. This means that the more severe a punishment is, the weightier the justification required to impose it (Spangenberg & Walsh, 1989). Although this principle is applied in most justice systems worldwide, justice is fallible. There has been evidence of people who have been imprisoned to life sentence and later found that they were innocent. In fact, in 2016, 116 people sentenced to death have been found innocent and released. This begs the question of whether life imprisonment is applied in a discriminatory way.

Additionally, more than 200 innocent prisoners have been freed in California after it was discovered they had been wrongfully convicted. Out of this number, three of them were serving

life imprisonment without parole (Pettit & Western, 2004). This makes life sentence a better option compared to capital punishment. Since justice has failed even in the aptest court systems in the world, life in prison remains a better alternative compared to capital punishment. Although Steve Herbert does not bring a comparison between capital punishment and life in prison without parole, one would prefer life imprisonment rather than the death penalty. At least the former gives a prisoner a chance for justice to come their way one day.

Another principle is that if human lives are to risk the risk should fall more heavily on the guilty than the innocent. This means that it would be risky to set free the guilty because there is a chance of them repeating the crimes they committed. This means that it would be better to sentence the criminals to life sentence so that none of them can commit the crime again. Spangenberg & Walsh (1989) argue that there is a possibility that a convicted murderer released from prison may kill again. There is recidivism among convicts, and there is that risk that murderers will kill again (Spangenberg & Walsh, 1989). These facts pose a moral dilemma concerning life imprisonment because according to the author's interaction with the inmates, it is evident that they have entirely reformed and when taken back to the society, there is no chance of repeating the crimes they committed. For example, Leonard, one of the inmates whom Herbert interacted with, was jailed at the age of eighteen. He has already spent a better part of his life in prison. Herbert tends to think that this person has reformed and should be released from jail. But philosophy is concerned about recidivism, that there is still a likelihood that this person, when released from jail, may commit a similar crime. It is therefore wise to think critically before accepting Herbert's sentiments or dismissing them.

The other angle of thinking that is evident from *Too Easy to Keep* is the justice system of the United States system and its politics. For example, one of the laws that led to the

imprisonment of one of the inmates (Edgar) is called "three strikes, and you are out." By this law, a person who is convicted of a high profile offense, along with two additional qualifying offenses, such a person should be liable for life imprisonment without parole. Most of the states in the United States have implemented this law (Zimring et al., 2001). California is the leading in such laws, with misdemeanor offenses qualifying as a strike under these laws. This is one of the laws that Herbert believes should not be used, especially to sentence people to life imprisonment. This law has its cons, including that people with three counts of non-violent offenses can be convicted through this law. (Zimring et al., 2001). This includes pretty crimes, and thus, justice is not applied for such punishments. Should one serve mandatory life sentence because of an offense like misdemeanor? Three strikes law is one of the laws that the author of "Too Easy to Keep" deems unfit to sentence one to life imprisonment. Apart from leading to prison overpopulation, the punishment assumes that rehabilitation will not work. This law, therefore, requires rethinking and reconsideration.

Conclusion

Too Easy to Keep is an exciting book with two main messages that life imprisonment should be abolished, and the laws and policies should also be reconsidered. The book is a must-read for policy implementers and everyone who believes in justice. The book provokes the readers to think deeply into some of the lifetime issues that do not seem significant-life sentence without parole. It provokes readers to think on the philosophical question of the importance of punishment. The book contributes to our understanding of correctional systems and practices in that after reading the book, one finds it not worthwhile to sentence people to life imprisonment. It helps one to have a reflection and a second thought concerning punishments such as capital punishment and life sentence.

From the book, the author interacts with the lifers, and they seem to have reformed, and he does not see the reason why they should continue being jailed. They do what they are supposed to, and this makes one think that when they are released, they will conform to the laws. This may cause one to reason that if a system does not deter crime, then it is not effective. The book also challenges the laws and policies of the American justice system. For example, the “three strikes and you are out” law has landed many people in jail (Jones & Newburn, 2006). Such policies and politics have made it hard to keep prisoners who have reformed and who deserve release. Such politics, therefore, require reconsideration.

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