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Wrong Way To Get Tough

By Mimi Silbert

SAN FRANCISCO
A 10 years old, Albert had already distinguished himself as the youngest member of his barrio gang. Recruited into gang life by his mother, he sold drugs diligently and remained loyal to his gang as he was shipped from one foster home to another during his mother's various prison terms.

Like many children, Albert had a dream. He dreamed of being in San Quentin Prison by his 18th birthday. He missed by a year. Albert went to San Quentin at 19, by which time he had been arrested for 27 armed robberies and fathered two children. He returned to prison several times for drug sales, robbery and burglary.

One glance at Albert's record would convince anyone that he was incorrigible, a career criminal and a menace to society. Had "three strikes and you're out" been a law then, Albert would have gone to prison for life.

Instead, today Albert is a polite, well-dressed gentleman with a mild and courteous demeanor. At 36, he has been crime-free, drug-free and violence-free for many years. He works as a plumber and substitute teacher, pays his taxes and worries about his children's schooling.

Our justice system works in extremes. Either we excuse the crimi-

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nal ("poor Albert had no mommy or daddy") and put him back on the streets, or we give up on him ("bad Albert is a menace"), lock him up and throw away the key. As with any extremes, these work for only a few.

A few criminals can turn themselves around with only a hand and a hug; most cannot. A few criminals need to be in prison forever; most do not. For most, we need a tightly structured community to control criminals, hold them responsible, get them off drugs and alcohol and teach them to be decent citizens.

In the past 23 years, 10,000 former felons, including Albert, have turned their lives around in just such a community. The Delancey Street Foundation in San Francisco is the nation's

Felons can turn their lives around.

largest self-help organization for felons and drug addicts. It accepts no government funds and has no paid staff. The entire organization is run by its residents; the foundation supports itself primarily through a number of training schools which provide vocational skills and generate the organization's income.

In today's climate, it's fashionable to reject such an approach as "soft on crime." But life here is anything but soft; new residents long for prison, where virtually nothing is expected of them. Prisoners are not required to work, confront their problems or change. Taxes pay for everything, drugs are easy to come by, and the daily routine can consist of watching television and pumping iron. Fights

and gangs are considered normal.

At Delancey Street, on the other hand, Albert had to live cooperatively with others, learn to read, admit responsibility for the harm he caused, earn his keep and make restitution to society. Not everyone here succeeds, of course, but most do: graduates include realtors, contractors, a deputy sheriff and even a member of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors.

Every person "three strikes and you're out" puts behind bars would cost the taxpayers about \$1 million (assuming a 35-year stay), and that is only the direct cost of building the cell and caring for the prisoner. We will also pay to support their children on welfare. Every person at Delancey Street costs the taxpayers nothing, and residents learn to care for their own children and pay their own taxes.

If building more prisons made our streets safe, it would merit a large investment. But it has failed to do so. In the last decade, California's prison population has increased 400 percent, its corrections budget 500 percent, yet violent crime is up 40 percent. No credible study concludes that more imprisonment means less crime.

We are no longer dealing with a few bad apples. Too many people are now too many generations into criminal behavior. Prison will not deter them, because they do not consider the consequences of their actions. They have been inculcated by abuse, violence and poverty at every level. This does not excuse their behavior; it intensifies the need to change it.

The only tough and smart response to crime is to break the cycle of it. The more responsible and productive people we can build now, the fewer prisons we will have to build later. □