

Prisons: The Games People Play

Put in

A research project conducted by Stanford University psychologists which was reported in this newspaper the other day is a reminder of something that a lot of us find difficult to learn: that prisons are bad for people. They are bad for guards and prisoners alike and, as a consequence, bad for the rest of us as well. The Stanford researchers set up a mock prison situation, selected—after testing—a group of young men who exhibited emotional stability, assigned them at random either as prisoners or as guards, told the guards to maintain law and order and to gain the respect of the prisoners and told them all that the experiment was to last for two weeks. Then they stood aside to see what would happen.

As William Chapman noted in an article on the opposite page yesterday, what they saw astonished them and made them abort their project after only six days. Most of the people in the project changed for the worse. The guards became sadistic and the prisoners became docile, self-disparaging and, in at least one instance, physically ill. Guards made prisoners clean toilets with their bare hands, push boxes around endlessly for no reason and generally harassed them just for sport. The prisoners, on the other hand, became steadily more depressed, hostile toward each other and ever more self-abasing. A number of prisoners became so distraught that they had to be released early and when the project was aborted, all of the remaining prisoners were delighted with their good fortune, while most of the guards were distressed that their role had ended.

Well, that is what you get in prisons—human deterioration even in carefully controlled experimental circumstances. But, the subjects of the experiment could walk

away after six days and adjust to a bad dream. Real world guards have to go day after day into the prisons in order to earn their livings and real life prisoners have no benign experimenters watching over them. Ultimately, they serve their hard time, bend their psyches to an inhumane system and then come out to live and deal with the rest of us. The effects of all of this are plain—in any large city in the United States—for all to see.

And, it is not as if there are no alternatives. Probation is a highly useful, but extraordinarily under-utilized criminal justice remedy. An exhaustive study done for this newspaper earlier in the year found that “probationers repeat crime at an apparent rate of about 27 per cent, compared to 40 to 70 per cent for people who spend time in prison.” In California, about 90 per cent of first felony offenders are put on probation with no noticeable increase in crime as a result of the project.

Although it is probably true that we can never entirely do away with incarceration, reforms should move in the opposite direction from the standard “solutions,” which are more incarceration, more prisons, more guards, better pay and more training programs inside the walls. Some of that is probably useful for the smaller prison systems we will undoubtedly continue to need, but any reforms which do not begin with the lessons that the Stanford experiment taught are bound to fail society as a whole. Alternatives to incarceration must be the starting point or most “prison reform” efforts will come to naught. And we will all be the poorer, for the prisons, unlike the serious Stanford game, are not games at all. They are deadly serious—or more to the point, they are just plain deadly.