

KEY IDEA: REHABILITATION IS DEAD



KEY WORK

Martinson, Robert (1974). What works? Questions and answers about prison reform. *The Public Interest*, 35, 22–54.

A glance into recent American history reveals a society characterized in part by lauded innovation and progressive development, but also one that has struggled to find answers to incessantly difficult questions. In both the academic and practical realm of criminology and criminal justice, one such struggle has surrounded the issue of *what*, exactly, states should do with law-violating members of society. In the words of Cullen and Gendreau (2000), “[t]his ostensibly simple question defies a simple answer” (p. 111). Should offenders simply be isolated from society for the longest reasonable time frame? Should the state organize its response to law violation around principles of retribution or delivering *harm* to seemingly deserving offenders? Or maybe states should focus their efforts around the principle of rehabilitation and changing offenders into law-abiding citizens? States have attempted each of these responses to one degree or another, but until relatively recently, the primary focus surrounded the effort to treat and correct

offenders' undesirable behaviors. Principles of rehabilitation were the dominant response—or at least it was widely believed that these principles *should* be the dominant response (Cullen & Gilbert, 1982; Rothman, 1980). This was true for most of the 19th century, but the 1970s brought about dramatic reform to the correctional industry. Interestingly, this reform was closely linked to what is now a widely known article written by Robert Martinson (1974).

This chapter aims to inform the reader about the most important aspects of Martinson's (1974) influential work in the field of corrections. To fully understand its significance, however, it will be necessary to move beyond the substantive content of Martinson's article itself. Consequently, this chapter will examine, in some detail, the broader sociopolitical context during the time when Martinson's work was published as well as the manner in which Martinson "marketed" the content of his research. Once these factors are considered, it will then be possible to better understand and explain the powerful influence that a single article can wield under the right conditions.

THE MARTINSON REPORT

In 1974, an article written by Robert Martinson appeared in the *The Public Interest*. It was titled "What Works? Questions and Answers About Prison Reform." As the title implies, Martinson's work attempted to assess the effectiveness of various prison reforms, particularly those aimed at rehabilitating criminal offenders and reducing recidivism. To provide answers about what works in the way of correctional rehabilitation, Martinson reviewed the available evidence from existing studies of offender treatment. In the end, his essay painted a picture of modern rehabilitation that could only be characterized by widespread failure. In summarizing the literature, Martinson stated confidently that "with few and isolated exceptions, the rehabilitative efforts that have been reported so far have had no appreciable effect on recidivism" (p. 25).

Martinson's harsh assessment of correctional rehabilitation was delivered through his 1974 essay, which became known as the Martinson Report (see Pratt, 2009), though it was actually derived from a lengthy manuscript later published in book form by himself and his colleagues (Lipton, Martinson, & Wilks, 1975). In this coauthored work, Lipton et al. gathered all available studies of correctional treatment, including only analyses considered to be scientifically rigorous and excluding those that failed to meet this standard. For example, studies that reached their conclusions in the absence of a control group were rightfully considered methodologically weak and unfit for inclusion in their review. Their comprehensive search of the treatment literature netted 231 studies conducted between 1945 and 1967, which in essence contained everything that the

scientific community knew about the effectiveness of offender rehabilitation. The only problem was that extracting all of the necessary knowledge from this large body of literature was a task that few academics had time for, let alone practitioners in the field of correctional treatment. A comprehensive synthesis of this research, then, had a very attractive benefit: It would allow correctional administrators, legislators, and any other interested parties to draw *scientifically* based conclusions about the success or failure of prison reform efforts. And of course, this science could then be used to drive the policies that determined how offenders should best be dealt with.

Basing his essay on this more comprehensive analysis, Martinson (1974) presented the reader with a series of questions—seven, to be precise—organized around the broad issue of “what works” in the context of prison reform. More specifically, Martinson posed an important question, followed by an answer, that was seemingly based on the best available empirical evidence at the time. For example, the first question posed to the reader asked,

Isn't it true that a correctional facility running a truly rehabilitative program—one that prepares inmates for life on the outside through education and vocational training—will turn out more successful individuals than will a prison which merely leaves its inmates to rot? (p. 25)

Similarly phrased questions were not only asked about education and vocational training, but also about various forms of counseling, milieu therapy, medical treatment, community corrections, and even more traditional approaches such as increasing the level of security and length of sentence faced by inmates.

Time and again, Martinson's guided tour of the research wandered down a path ending with a similar conclusion: Prison reforms, as they existed, were quite simply unable to rehabilitate inmates in any consistent fashion. As mentioned, Martinson's tour began with an examination of the effectiveness of education and vocational training. Such training is commonplace in American prisons, and the assumption is that bettering inmates through education and providing them with skills to be employed in the marketplace will help them become a better fit in society, ultimately reducing future offending. This is certainly a worthy goal to be upheld by prisons seeking inmate reform, but can training of this nature truly reshape offenders and reduce recidivism? In reviewing the research, Martinson pointed to several studies that examined this question in the context of both young and adult males. Of the studies discussed, only one was able to demonstrate a reduction in recidivism, but this unique finding was quickly attributed to bias in the experimental group. Martinson (1974) was unable to explain why education and vocational programs were failing, but he was

able to ensure the reader that “[w]hat we do know is that, to date, education and skill development have not reduced recidivism by rehabilitating criminals” (p. 28).

Working with the assumption that education and vocational training were not adequate methods for a truly rehabilitative approach, the reader was then assisted through the varied landscape of inmate counseling, including forms of psychotherapy, individual counseling, group counseling, and a form of counseling referred to as casework. At this juncture, Martinson put forth a similar view—one that appeared to reveal little success and much failure. Though Martinson noted that some studies reported positive findings (i.e., reduced recidivism), these effects appeared to be overshadowed by the fact that other studies found no effect at all or were considered too ambiguous to be useful. Considering the *inconsistent* findings, Martinson suggested that the empirical information was of little use to policy makers who were in need of generalizable results that could be readily applied with some certainty of success.

Of course, it was very possible that treatment effects were being compromised by the typical characteristics of prison environments (e.g., stressful inmate interactions, violence, participation in prison subcultures, gang activity, etc.), and if this was the case, it would be no surprise that rehabilitation did not seem to work. Considering this shortcoming, Martinson reviewed studies of milieu therapy, or therapy that was directed toward modifying the inmates’ entire correctional environment, to sidestep the issue of negative prison influences. Here, the entire focus of the inmates’ new environment was that of rehabilitation—maintaining security and doling out punishment took a backseat. This prevented the undesirable situation where inmates spent a few hours a day in a treatment program, only to be immediately released back into the criminogenic environment of the prison. But even this methodology fell short according to Martinson’s review of the research—once again, the reader was presented with a body of literature that was described as inconsistent and lacking encouragement.

The same story is told of efforts to rehabilitate offenders through medical treatment, harsher sentencing, and community treatment. With regard to medical treatment, the only clearly positive finding reported by Martinson surrounded the castration of sex offenders in Denmark, but despite its supposed efficacy, this form of treatment was hardly considered mainstream. Placing offenders in higher-security institutions where the environment enforces stricter controls over the inmate and incarcerating offenders for longer periods of time were also unlikely to reduce recidivism according to Martinson’s analysis. Here, too, the evidence was said to be mixed, leading Martinson (1974) to claim that “[n]o more than in the case of institution type can we say that length of sentence has a clear relationship to recidivism” (p. 38). In keeping with the theme of inconsistency, the effects of community-based treatments were also reported to be mixed. Martinson did, however, present some positive

news regarding the treatment of offenders in the community: Even though it failed to lower recidivism, it was cheaper than traditional methods of imprisonment.

In sum, the evidence presented by Martinson clearly suggested that rehabilitation was ineffective for reducing future criminality. What was less clear, however, was exactly *why* rehabilitation was failing to show positive results in the literature. Martinson suggested that it was possible that the methods used to evaluate the treatment programs were simply not rigorous enough to capture their benefits. Or maybe the programs themselves, he proffered, were simply not being implemented as they were intended. These considerations were both recognized as potential candidates, but Martinson left his readers with an additional possibility—one that he appeared to subscribe to himself. Martinson (1974) suggested the following:

It may be, on the other hand, that there is a more radical flaw in our present strategies—that education at its best, or that psychotherapy at its best, cannot overcome, or even appreciably reduce, the powerful tendencies for offenders to continue in criminal behavior. (p. 49)

SOCIAL CONTEXT

Before examining the influence that Martinson's research had in the field of corrections, a close consideration of the era's social and political climate is essential. In the years preceding the publication of Martinson's work, the nation as a whole was experiencing a troublesome crime problem. For reasons that were not entirely clear, both violent and property crimes had been on the rise throughout the 1960s, and this seemingly out-of-control crisis was propelled to the forefront of social thought, political campaigns, and certainly the American news media. During 1960, the Uniform Crime Reports indicated that there were approximately 9,110 homicides, or just over 5 per every 100,000 individuals in the United States. Over the next 15 years, the number of homicides literally doubled—more than 20,000 Americans (9.8 per 100,000) were murdered in 1974, the same year that Martinson's article appeared in print (Fox & Zawitz, 2007).

When examining other violent crimes, equally if not more troubling trends emerged. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the rates of aggravated assault, robbery, and rape more than tripled (see Gurr, 1981, for a historical review), striking fear into many law-abiding Americans. Concerns for public safety grew alongside the rising crime rates, and the severity of the situation was further exacerbated by the characteristics of these new crimes. When examining homicides, it was clear that dispute-related homicides, where the victim and offender knew one another, had remained relatively stable. Instead, it was robbery-related homicides, where the offender and

victim had no relation at all, that were on the rise (Gurr, 1981). Crimes of this nature seemed to indicate that the crisis was not just affecting wayward, risk-prone individuals, but also undeserving, innocent bystanders—*anyone* could be a potential victim.

The dramatic increase in crime had captured the attention of the American people, and not surprisingly, crime control policies became a central component of the era's political campaigns and media coverage (Cavender, 2004). Since crime had recently spiraled out of control, it was apparent that the nation required immediate action in developing an effective response. Prompted by public concerns, politicians began to offer their views of promising solutions to the crime problem. It was during the 1964 presidential campaign that "street crime" first became such a dominant political issue—one that was introduced by Republican senator and presidential candidate Barry Goldwater (Simon, 2007). Though Goldwater's campaign was ultimately unsuccessful at gaining him the presidency, the concerns he expressed about the nation's rising crime rates resonated well with the American public—so well, in fact, that after defeating Goldwater in the presidential election, Lyndon Johnson officially declared a "war on crime." Since Johnson was unable to win the war during his years as president, when Richard Nixon took office in 1969, he too declared war on crime (Walker, 2006).

The nation's crime problem remained at center stage throughout much of the 1960s and persisted as a central issue into the 1970s. After witnessing the crime rates rise continuously throughout the previous decade, despite the proclaimed "war," the media began to take an even sharper interest in the nation's crime policies (Cavender, 2004). If crime could reach what appeared to be catastrophic levels in such a short period of time, it was reasoned, something *must* have been wrong with the criminal justice system. Not surprisingly, much of the crime control debate surrounded what exactly states were doing with criminals once they got their hands on them. At this point in time, the primary emphasis of the correctional system had been to provide *correction*, or treatment, for inmates. Consequently, the goal of correctional rehabilitation became central to the discussion of crime control.

Conservative critics honed their focus on what they believed to be a profound weakness in the rehabilitative ideal—convicted criminals were being released from prison *early* rather than serving the full length of their sentences. The fact was, rehabilitating inmates was no easy enterprise. It was not always clear what the best treatment approach should be, and it was certainly not clear how long it would take to rehabilitate any given inmate. Since there was no universal formula for treating offenders, the correctional system needed considerable leeway, or flexibility, to get the job done—this flexibility came in the form of *indeterminate sentencing* (Cullen & Gilbert, 1982; Spohn, 2000). Rather than sentencing offenders to a fixed or determined period of time within the correctional system,

judges sentenced offenders to a possible range of time with a minimum and maximum length of stay. For example, a burglar might be sentenced to a term of 2–10 years in prison. The use of indeterminate sentencing allowed correctional agencies (through the use of parole boards) to keep treatment-resistant offenders for lengthy periods of time in the interest of successful rehabilitation. For the less difficult offenders, however, it was common practice to provide their supervised release shortly after they served the minimum length of stay.

Conservatives looked in on this process and saw a considerably flawed system—one that had the potential to keep criminals off the streets for longer periods of time, but deliberately chose not to. To conservatives, the rehabilitative ideal, which was largely born out of the liberal Progressive movement of the early 20th century, was far too lenient (see Cullen & Gilbert, 1982; Rothman, 1980). The aim of the system was all wrong—instead of focusing on fixing offenders, conservatives believed that a better system would focus its efforts on harsh punishment, deterrence, and incapacitation. To accomplish this, however, states would need to adopt harsher *determinate* sentencing structures where offenders served out a fixed term. Rehabilitation and its reliance on the indeterminate sentence stood directly in the way of these goals.

Since the heavy focus on correctional treatment was primarily the result of a liberal movement, it was not terribly surprising to see critiques leveled from conservative camps. Criticisms aimed at rehabilitation, however, were not limited to those from the right. Progressive liberals, who in the decades past had so proudly introduced the noble ideas underlying a rehabilitative correctional system, had also begun to see critical flaws (Cullen & Gilbert, 1982). It was not that the concept of rehabilitation itself was faulty, but rather the way that it was carried out in practice. Once offenders entered the correctional system, they fell squarely under the control of the government. Unfortunately, during the 1960s and 1970s a variety of events unfolded—events that caused many American citizens to lose faith in the very government that they had previously trusted to thoughtfully rehabilitate troubled offenders.

During the mid-1960s, the United States began to escalate its involvement in the ongoing Vietnam conflict, a decision that was not well received by many Americans at the time. As more and more soldiers lost their lives to a war that many failed to understand, public unrest began to grow (Heineman, 1993). Success in Vietnam had proven hard to come by, and Americans at home began to protest further involvement by the United States. By the end of Lyndon Johnson's presidency, thousands of Americans had lost their lives to the conflict. As the war continued on, in spite of growing disapproval, trust in the government to do the right thing began to dwindle.

The unpopularity of the Vietnam War had already left a sour taste in the mouths of many Americans, but the events that took place at Kent State

University on May 4, 1970, were even more troubling (Heineman, 1993). Many Americans wanted an end to the Vietnam War, and the government, led by the Nixon administration, had promised to bring this about. When news broke that the American military had expanded its efforts beyond the borders of Vietnam and into neighboring Cambodia, further protesting and public unrest broke out. At Kent State University, hundreds of students gathered to voice their antiwar opinions. When confronted by the National Guard, the students refused to end their protest and disperse, ultimately resulting in retaliation that shocked the conscience of America. Several National Guard members opened fire into the crowd, killing four unarmed students and wounding an additional nine. If Americans previously lacked a reason to distrust their government, it appeared that ample justification had been provided.

Governmental distrust also spilled over into the management of the criminal justice system itself. The very next year in 1971, the prisoners of New York's Attica Correctional Facility began rioting over what they felt to be poor living conditions. Within a short window of time, the inmates had taken complete control of the prison, holding several correctional officers hostage (see Useem & Kimball, 1991, for an overview). The initial takeover of the prison was followed by 4 days of negotiations, and Americans watched intently as state authorities struggled with the volatile situation. After several rounds of unsuccessful negotiations, it was decided that the prison would be retaken by force. On the morning of September 13, state police shot tear gas over the walls of the prison and followed up with a hail of bullets and shotgun blasts, indiscriminately killing dozens of inmates and even the correctional officers who were being held hostage. As reports of the death toll surfaced, Americans were, once again, shocked by the draconian response of their government.

The political turmoil spawned by the unpopular War in Vietnam, the Kent State massacre, and the Attica prison riot would seem to be troubling enough, but the years leading up to the mid-1970s were also characterized by a struggle for universal civil rights. During this era, the nation endured severe growing pains as citizens worked to eliminate various sources of discrimination. The aim of a more just society created a strong emphasis on fair and equal treatment for all citizens, despite their race, sex, or religion. Civil rights battles were fought and many were won, including the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, yet the nation continued to struggle with issues of social justice. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, questions about the treatment of poor minority offenders also began to garner attention. As Walker (2006) points out, "critics labeled America's jails the 'new poorhouses'" (p. 133). Money and status appeared to be more important than guilt or innocence.

By the time 1974 came around, many citizens had become disillusioned by the American government. Under the rehabilitative ideal, state and federal authorities had been given substantial discretion in the

treatment of prison inmates, but the question of whether or not government officials could be trusted with this power was of serious concern (Cullen & Gendreau, 2000, Cullen & Gilbert, 1982). For many liberals—particularly *justice model* liberals who sought equality—the answer was an emphatic *no*. So, while conservatives believed that rehabilitation was too lenient, liberals of the era came to believe that it was a source of grave injustice. In the words of Cullen and Gendreau,

For liberals, the discretion given to state officials was applied inequitably and coercively. In their eyes, judges were free to discriminate against poor and minority offenders, while parole boards used their discretion to punish offenders who challenged the status quo of an inhumane prison regime. (p. 122)

In the end, the social and political climate that emerged during the 1960s and 1970s cast considerable doubt over the appropriateness of correctional rehabilitation as the primary goal of American corrections. So, when Martinson's (1974) research announced that correctional treatment was essentially a defunct enterprise, the nation saw the perfect opportunity to legitimately sound the death knell for rehabilitation.

GETTING THE WORD OUT

There is no doubt that Martinson's research was released at a time when the nation was willing to listen, but this alone is rarely enough for most scientific endeavors—especially those of the social science flavor—to generate a powerful impact. Previous scholars reflecting on the influence of the Martinson Report have pointed out that his findings alone were not as revolutionary as one might think (Cavender, 2004; Cullen & Gendreau, 2000; Cullen & Gilbert, 1982). In fact, Martinson was not even the first social scientist of the era to publish research suggesting that rehabilitation did not work. A few years earlier, in 1966, Walter Bailey published a study summarizing 100 reports pertaining to correctional treatment. Ultimately, he drew very similar conclusions to Martinson, seriously questioning the effectiveness of rehabilitation programs. In 1971, two researchers by the names of James Robison and Gerald Smith published an assessment of treatment programs in California. Their findings also challenged the efficacy of rehabilitation programs, but it seemed that no one was listening. Like Bailey's work, theirs was also greeted with relative silence.

So why did Martinson, who essentially offered a similar view to prior researchers, gain so much attention for his work? Martinson's article appeared in print a few years later than the previously discussed works, and the social conditions were that much riper for change. Even so, it would appear that there was more to the story. Yes, Martinson drew similar conclusions to previous scholars, but he did do a few things differently.

First, he published his findings in a journal called *The Public Interest*. The journal was not heralded for its scientific objectivity, but it did carry the voice of prominent thinkers, including Harvard professor James Q. Wilson who also spoke out against the rehabilitation ideal. As such, *The Public Interest* was better poised to reach a larger audience and potentially yield a larger influence in the field. By way of contrast, Bailey's (1966) and Robison and Smith's (1971) research findings were published in more specialized academic journals. In fact, Robison and Smith's work appeared in *Crime & Delinquency*, a peer-reviewed journal that was, and remains, highly regarded in academia. However, even though the journal had an emphasis on publishing only the highest quality research, its audience was not as broad or far reaching as that of *The Public Interest*.

Martinson was successful in getting his findings out to a relatively large audience, but in this particular instance, he also avoided a shortcoming that is very prevalent in the world of academic research. Many social scientists work diligently to conduct studies and provide answers to important questions, but more often than not, their work is written for other academics. These researchers tend to get excited about advancing a particular body of knowledge, but frequently forget about connecting their research to the "real world" in any meaningful way. As Martinson drafted his manuscript for publication, it would seem that he deliberately avoided this shortcoming. Instead of filling his manuscript with technical jargon, he carefully crafted his thoughts around simple yet important questions that would generate the interest of not only specialists, but nearly any layperson as well. In addition, the mere fact that his research was organized around a series of questions meant that he was clearly providing the reader with a series of *answers*. This is exactly what practitioners desire when it comes to interpreting research—everything was clearly spelled out, and special skills were not required to decrypt the important information. Of course, if the questions are of significant importance and the answers are clearly provided, policy decisions are that much easier to make. Under these circumstances, study findings have a better chance of creating real-world impacts.

This strategy was fairly successful, as by the very next year, in 1975, Martinson's study had garnered so much attention that he was invited to appear on *60 Minutes* to share his findings with the nation. In a recent analysis of media effects on crime policy, researcher Gray Cavender (2004) recapped Martinson's appearance: The segment was placed in the context of the nation's rising crime rates, and Martinson was asked several questions about the effectiveness of rehabilitation. When asked whether or not these programs work, Martinson informed the host, Mike Wallace, along with millions of viewers, that treatment programs "have no fundamental effect" on offenders. In the end, Martinson was able to successfully disseminate his research among not only researchers, but also practitioners, policy makers, and even the general public.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE MARTINSON REPORT

Considering the social context of the 1960s and 1970s along with Martinson's strategy for disseminating his findings, it is clear that his work was well positioned to powerfully influence the world of offender rehabilitation. Correctional treatment had already developed a tarnished reputation and fallen from the favor of many Americans. Since it was not only disliked, but, according to the latest science, also ineffective, it seemed the perfect opportunity for many to abandon rehabilitation altogether. Of course, abandoning rehabilitation meant that there had to be some other more favorable strategy waiting in the wings to take its place. Remember, conservatives viewed rehabilitation as simply a slap on the wrist—criminals were getting out of prison too quickly and would-be criminals went undeterred by this unnecessary leniency. In the end, conservatives wanted harsher punishment for offenders, and this meant that indeterminate sentencing would need to be replaced by determinate sentencing where criminals were kept behind bars for fixed terms. Liberals were not seeking harsher punishment as much as they were seeking equity in the treatment of offenders, but as it turned out, determinate sentencing seemed to offer a solution to this as well. Criminals would be treated more harshly, but with predetermined sentences; judges would have far less discretion; and the seemingly discriminatory parole boards could be eliminated altogether. After all, if a precise sentence is determined ahead of time, what use would parole boards have? This approach, then, was able to simultaneously satisfy *both* conservatives and the justice model liberals (Cullen & Gendreau, 2000).

With a new vision in place, the criminal justice system was destined for serious reform, and this is precisely what took place in the years following Martinson's work. Rehabilitation was trumped by the desire for retribution and just deserts, and states began to rapidly adopt new laws with this aim in mind (Rothman, 1980; Spohn, 2000; Walker, 1993). These new regulations marked the end of the indeterminate sentence for many states and came in the form of sentencing guidelines, presumptive sentencing structures, mandatory minimum sentences, truth-in-sentencing statutes, and three-strikes laws. Sentencing guidelines, which were adopted by many of the states and the federal government, provided judges with a "grid" based on the offender's prior record and offense seriousness (Spohn, 2000). Using these two factors, the appropriate sentence could simply be "looked up" and applied to each offender that came before the court. Other similar presumptive sentencing structures also limited the options available to judges, substantially reducing their discretion.

Though both of these approaches were aimed at creating equity in the criminal justice system, most of the emphasis was placed on creating a system with more *bite*. Mandatory minimum sentencing statutes were passed by most states to ensure that offenders who engaged in certain

crimes (usually violent or drug-related crimes) would receive more substantial sentences. These laws were successful at keeping prisoners behind bars for longer periods of time, but offenders were still able to earn an early release through “good time” or “good behavior,” sometimes cutting their sentences in half or better. To limit the effect of good time incentives, “truth in sentencing” laws were enacted by many states to guarantee or mandate that offenders serve a certain portion of their sentence behind bars, typically 85 percent or more. Other states have gone even further by eliminating good time altogether, mandating that 100 percent of the sentence be served (Ditton & Wilson, 1999). “Three strikes” laws, which began to appear in the early 1990s, seemed to fully embody the powerful shift that had taken place in the criminal justice system. Washington State was the first to pass such a statute, but it was California’s “three strikes and you’re out” law that garnered national attention (Walker, 2006). These politically popular statutes put into place mandatory life sentences for offenders convicted of a third felony. Significant changes to the criminal justice system were clearly underway.

Parole, which had been integral to American corrections for most of the 19th century, rapidly transformed to accommodate the onslaught of new determinate sentencing laws. Prior to the mid-1970s, the process of inmate release was fairly universal in that states and the federal government relied on the decision making of parole boards (Rothman, 1980). Once an offender had served the minimum portion of his or her sentence, the individual became eligible for release, and parole boards held the authority to make this decision. The discretionary release of offenders by parole boards, however, quickly morphed into a mandatory release mechanism in many states, where offenders were automatically discharged, but only after they completed their full sentence (minus acquired good time), as prescribed by law. In 1977, approximately three-quarters of all offenders were released at the discretion of a parole board—this figure dropped to just under one-quarter by the late 1990s (Petersilia, 2003). Once released, the remainder of the sentence was carried out in the community under parole supervision, but this too began to take on a different form. Parole was originally designed to assist inmates with community reintegration, since transitioning out of prison was rarely an easy task. The prevailing social climate, however, refocused the emphasis of parole around more intense supervision for the purpose of catching recidivists and returning them to prison (Petersilia, 2003).

The abandonment of rehabilitation for the renewed goals of retribution, incapacitation, and deterrence has certainly yielded important procedural changes to the correctional arena, but probably the most pronounced effect of this movement has been the unprecedented growth of the prison industry (Austin & Irwin, 2001; Pratt, 2009). Prior to the reforms that began in the mid-1970s, the punishment trends in America had been relatively stable (Clear, 1994). However, when the new “get

tough” policies began to take effect, this changed in dramatic ways. During the following decade, between 1980 and 1990, the incarceration rate more than doubled, from 139 to nearly 300 per 100,000 citizens, and it has currently risen to more than 500 per 100,000 citizens (West & Sabol, 2008). With more than 2.3 million people behind bars, the United States now operates the world’s largest prison system (Pratt, 2009; Walker, 2006). In fact, the prison system has become so large that many states have considerable trouble housing their massive inmate populations (Franklin, Franklin, & Pratt, 2006).

It should be noted that these profound changes to the American criminal justice system did not go unchallenged. Very early on, several scholars directly confronted the notion that rehabilitation was a failed enterprise. The next year, Palmer (1975) published an article refuting Martinson’s report. According to Martinson, none of the different treatment *types* (e.g., education, counseling, milieu therapy) were able to *consistently* reduce recidivism—within each of the different treatment modalities, some studies reported success while others did not. To Martinson, this indicated an overall failure. Palmer’s reanalysis of the very same studies, however, revealed that nearly *half* of them demonstrated reductions in recidivism. Looked at this way, it was more difficult to argue that rehabilitation had *no fundamental effect* on offender behavior. If nothing worked, how could half of the studies mentioned in Martinson’s (1974) article show reductions in recidivism? Although this was an important question, the prevailing social climate was not exactly demanding an answer. A few years later, even Martinson himself realized that his article had been somewhat exaggerated, and in a later work entitled *New Findings, New Views: A Note of Caution Regarding Sentencing Reform* (1979), he withdrew his heavy-handed “nothing works” position (see Cullen & Gendreau, 2000). Not surprisingly, even his recant was virtually ignored.

CONCLUSION

When Robert Martinson’s (1974) article first appeared in print, it drew almost immediate attention from scholars, policy makers, practitioners, and even popular media outlets. His work provided the scientific foundation for what was to become one of the most significant shifts in modern American corrections. It is certainly rare for any single piece of research to mobilize such powerful changes, and in the case of Martinson’s work, it has been demonstrated that there was much more to the situation than an important set of research findings. Instead, a combination of favorable factors had converged to elevate Martinson’s work to one of the most important pieces of research in recent criminal justice history. In the mid-1970s, the social and political climate was ripe for change. Both conservatives *and* liberals were prepared to abandon rehabilitation, though for different

reasons. Conservatives were fed up with rehabilitation because it was “soft on crime.” Liberals, on the other hand, were angered by the excessive discretion afforded to less-than-trustworthy judicial and correctional officials in the name of rehabilitation. It was at this time that Martinson’s article appeared in print, essentially claiming that “nothing works” in the realm of correctional treatment. Martinson was successful in communicating his findings, and once they reached the public domain, his results spread with intensity. As it turned out, his research was precisely what was needed by those who had already grown averse to the rehabilitative ideal, and in the end, it served as the *scientific justification* for both the abandonment of rehabilitation and the birth of the “tough on crime” criminal justice system of today.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why was it that during the 1970s many conservatives disliked rehabilitation and its reliance on the indeterminate sentence?
2. Why did many liberals, who have traditionally stood behind the use of rehabilitation, disfavor its use in the 1970s?
3. What was the impact of Martinson’s (1974) work on the practice of corrections in America?

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