

Taking Accountability
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For Columbia Center for Contemporary Critical Thought

Accountability. For a person serving a life sentence in California, you must take accountability for your crimes. If you don't take accountability, don't expect the parole board to give you a date.

While the board appreciates hearing about your insight into the contributing factors that lead up to your bad choices, they don't want to hear you minimizing why you committed the crime. Minimizing means blaming others, making excuses -- trying to make yourself sound good or not so bad.

When you have committed a horrible crime taking accountability makes sense -- if you don't acknowledge your wrong doing, if you continue to justify your immoral conduct, you're likely to continue that illegal conduct-- hurt others because you were hurt.

Even if someone did something provocative that influenced your choice to react in violence, even if you were abused in foster homes, even if your parents were addicts, even if you grew up in a gang infested neighborhood--no matter what--you have the power to chose to do the right thing so you shouldn't blame anyone else for your choices. You can't control anyone else but yourself so it's important to own your power to do the right thing in the face of life's difficulties.

Today, I take accountability for my crimes and ownership of my power to make sure I never commit another act of violence ever again. One of the most significant problems with the criminal legal system today is that it doesn't do the same - the powers that be do not take accountability for their role in creating and continuing cycles of violence.

We have created horrible circumstances than solely blamed the least powerful for having moral failings. However, "[m]ost violence is not just a matter of individual pathology--it is created. Poverty drives violence. Inequity drives violence. Lack of opportunities drives violnece. Shame and isolation drive violence. And ... violence drives violence," wrote Danielle Sered in her book, "Until We Reckon."

We created inner city crime with our redlining, employment discrimination, racism, oppression, blue wall protecting police brutality, FBI COINTELPRO program, gun show loopholes, voter suppression, mass incarceration, school-to-prison pipelines, etc. Yet we address crime with more violence that lead to more violence.

We call the police to deal with people who have mental health issues than demand murder charges when shoot to kill training

takes another life. We ask cops to solve drug addiction with handcuffs and mass incarceration.

We have created laws that hand the harshest penalties to the least powerful like California's 10-20-life gun law. The gun enhancement tact on additional prison time as follows: 10 years for using a gun in a crime, 20 years for firing it, and 25-to-life if the gun was used to cause great bodily injury or death.

We warehouse people in prisons which causes more cycles of violence. A child with a parent in prison is about 4 times more likely to follow that path. Prison makes it difficult to earn a living, keeping a person in poverty. Witnessing or experiencing violence can lead to carrying out violence. Isolating people from society breaks community ties which can also lead to violence. Then we give individuals who get out and return life sentences under the three strikes law for their "moral failings" without regard for how we failed them.

In order to fix the criminal legal system, we must reckon with our past and stop seeking to solve crimes with violence.

Violence nor prison stops violence. I didn't change my ways until at 44 years old, I sat in circles with hundreds of men who committed crimes and in doing so, I heard their back stories. They were all hurt people. "Trauma is not just the consequence of harm, but also its cause. It is people who are traumatized who commit most violent crimes," Zack Norris wrote in his book, We Keep Us Safe.

Access to self-help groups wasn't at any other prison I've been. San Quentin is a unique prison with dozens of self-groups helping men heal from their trauma. I've seen dozens of men take those groups, heal, and go home assets to the community. Furthermore, this prison allows volunteers from the community enter to facilitate the programs which addressing another root cause of crime -- isolation.

I meet playwright Cori Thomas when she visited San Quentin with producer Ellen Horne to interview me and Emile DeWeaver (~~paroled~~ writer, advocate and founder of Prison Renaissance now paroled) for an Audible project. Blown away by the emotionally intelligent human beings she met, Cousin Cori as I call her (same last name but no relation) decided to become a volunteer for a group called, No More Tears, which addresses trauma. Addressing trauma is a much better use of prison time.

Her play Lockdown displays how a man can heal, change and help others change but sometimes the system wants your eye for the eye you took. This underscores the importance of addressing the root causes of crime so that two lives don't get wasted in the first place.

When we don't have the systems in place to prevent crime, when we instead invest in mutual destruction, we are also at fault. We must take accountability by acknowledging where we can do better and change direction.

We need to start in the community with schools. Countless experts agree, trauma is a root cause of violent crime yet emotional intelligence isn't taught in high schools. "In addition to reading, writing, and arithmetic, all kids need to learn self-awareness, self-regulation, and communication as part of their core curriculum," wrote Dr. Bessel van der Kolk, author of "The Body Keeps The Score." He ends his book by saying, "Trauma is now our most urgent public health issue, and we have the knowledge necessary to respond effectively. The choice is ours to act on what we know."

Expanding on Kolk's statement, we have the knowledge necessary to effectively prevent all crime without using violence. So will we continue to "solve" crime through blame and violence or will we choose to take accountability and prevent crime with --investing in creating more opportunities than obstacles in our communities, Financial Empowerment & Emotional Literacy, Restorative Justice, formerly incarcerated violence prevention mentors, mental health experts, teaching emotional intelligence in schools--love and respect for the human being in all of us?

Rahsaan "New York" Thomas is the co-host and co-producer of the Pulitzer Prize nominated podcast Ear Hustle, as well as a contributing writer for The Marshall Project and San Quentin News. He is currently incarcerated and has a legal campaign seeking to help to secure his freedom at bit.ly/BringRahsaanHome