

## Does Putting People in Jail Cause More Crime? An Interview with James Gilligan

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**It was reported out of California recently that highway violence was up 51 percent since 1990. What can you say about that type of violence coming from otherwise ordinary people?**

Violence comes out of a whole culture. It comes out of a society. If you have a society that places a high value on recklessness [and] risk taking behavior, or a society that places a rather low value on human life, it isn't surprising that you have a variety of different kinds of violence. Cars are a symbol of masculinity. One way people can prove their masculinity is by driving recklessly, having the flashiest car, the fastest car. And if somebody does something they experience as an insult, cuts them off or doesn't treat them with the right kind of respect, people will go off.

I've heard more than any other explanation when I've asked really violent people why they assaulted somebody and *invariably* they say "because they disrespected me." They use the term so often that it's been *abbreviated* into the term he "dissed" me. It's an everyday term and an everyday experience. What that means is people, especially young men, statistically, will kill other people if they diss them in a way that seems unbelievably trivial if you read about it in the paper.

**How is it that we are sitting here in this room, and if somebody disses us, we might get raving mad but we're not going to kill the person. Is there something that leads a person to more likely become a killer?**

Everybody gets dissed and nobody likes it. Yet, most people can avoid serious violence. One difference is that people who turn to violence don't see themselves as having any adequate nonviolent means available to restoring their self-respect. They feel powerless. Most of us have something going that can restore our self-esteem, some kind of achievement, education, or standing in the community. People that don't really have an education, a job, or social status are really vulnerable to becoming violent.

When we did a study a few years ago to try to find out what programs had been most successful in preventing *recidivism*, the one program that we found had 100 percent success rate in preventing recidivism was people getting their college degree. Nothing builds a person's self-respect as much as achievement. Getting knowledge and skills is achievement. But we need to give people the tools to get self-respect.

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Another big difference is that most people, during the course of their growing up, develop a capacity to feel guilt, empathy, and remorse for others, and that stops their impulse to hurt them. They experience anger, but they hold themselves back. People that are vulnerable to becoming violent have been so badly punished in the course of their growing up that they were never able to develop a conscience. People who become violent are people who have already been severely punished. We call it child abuse, but their parents call it punishment, or discipline.

**Aside from educational programs that treat people who have already become violent, what should we be doing to prevent violence?**

We need to start at the beginning. A tremendous number of prison inmates are illiterate. We need to provide literacy training. Get people their GEDs, and then be ready to do more.

Violence is a problem of public health. It is important for us to recognize that cleaning up our social and economic system is going to do more to prevent violence and crime than all police, prisons, and courts can do. There is a significant correlation among the countries of the world between the income gap of the rich and poor and the murder rate: The wider the gap, the higher the murder rate. The countries with the narrowest gaps between rich and poor, like Sweden and Japan, have the lowest murder rates.

The U.S. today has the widest gap in wealth between rich and poor of any developed country on earth, and we have a higher murder rate than any other developed country on earth. Our murder rate is running five to ten times higher than any other developed



economy. The psychology of violence is such that if you have one group of people who are very poor in a society where other people are very rich, that increases feelings of inferiority, shame, and humiliation among people who are at the bottom. Especially if you have the myth, like we do in this country, that there is such a thing as equal opportunity, and if you just work hard you're going to become a millionaire.

**What about the prison system itself? It's an industry. Do you see any concrete ways that this is contributing to the rise in crime?**

Small towns around America are now competing with each other, bidding to get prisons in their communities because they are a source of employment. This is draining money away from programs that have been proven to decrease the rate of crime and violence, such as education.

In California, they are spending more money on the prison system than on their universities. There are more young Black men in prison than there are in college, even though it costs more to keep them in prison for a year than it would be to send them to college for a year. It's running about \$30,000 a year to keep somebody in prison. You could send somebody to any college on earth for that amount of money and most for a lot less.

We know that the quadrupling of our rate of imprisonment that has occurred since 1973 has not had the slightest effect on the murder rate. Aggravated assault, rape, armed robbery—the rates of these crimes have enormously increased since 1973, throughout the time we've been increasing the prison population. To me, this is strong evidence that punishment stimulates violence rather than inhibiting it. Yet, people who call for more punishment and prisons say this is how we stop the rate of crime and violence. People ask me if I'm for prison reform. Prisons can't be reformed. Prisoners can be reformed. But prisons are beyond reform. It would benefit every man, woman, and child in this country, and endanger nobody, if we took all the prisoners out of prisons, demolished the prisons, and replaced them with small, locked, and secure residential schools and colleges, therapeutic communities, and only put people in them who committed serious violent crimes. Do not put people in them for property crimes, drug offenses, or offenses against morals, like prostitution or gambling, because the best way to make a nonviolent person violent is to put them in prison.

There is a notion that we can do anything we like to prisoners without having it kick back on us. Well, stop and think about it. Ninety to 95 percent of the people who get sent to prison are back on the streets within two years. You can't torture someone into feeling accountable. The way you teach people is by example.

*Excerpted with permission from Spare Change, December 1, 1996. James Gilligan, M.D., directed the Center for the Study of Violence at Harvard University's Medical School. He is the former director of Bridgewater State Hospital for the criminally insane, and was the director of mental health for the Massachusetts Prison System.*

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**Reading Activities**

- Before reading, discuss the illustration. What story is it telling?
  - Have students discuss the title of the article: How would they answer the title's question?
  - Preview vocabulary that appears in the article:  
*abbreviate*: to make a word shorter by leaving out letters  
*invariably*: every time  
*recidivism*: committing more crimes and returning to prison
  - Divide the students into four groups. Have each group read one question and answer from the interview, discuss their understanding of it, and present the information to the class.
  - As they read, have students make notes of their thoughts or of experiences that relate to the author's points. After reading, have them draw from these notes to write more about what they think of this issue.
  - Have students review the article, identifying statements of fact and opinion, and checking to see if there is evidence to support the claims that the author makes.
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**Discussing Quotes from the Text**

1. *One difference is that people who turn to violence don't see themselves as having any adequate nonviolent means available to restoring their self-respect.*
    - Explain this statement in your own words. Do you agree with it? Why or why not?
    - Why would lack of self-respect lead to violence?
  2. *People who don't really have an education, a job, or social status are really vulnerable to becoming violent.*
    - Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not? What can you say to support your position?
  3. *There is a significant correlation among the countries of the world between the income gap of the rich and poor and the murder rate. The wider the gap, the higher the murder rate.*
    - Explain this statement in your own words.
    - Why do you think there are more murders in countries where there are a few very rich people and many, many more poor people? Do you agree with the reasons Gilligan gives?
  4. *There are more young Black men in prison than there are in college, even though it costs more to keep them in prison for a year than it would be to send them to college for a year. It's running about \$30,000 a year to keep somebody in prison.*
    - How much does it cost to keep a person in prison for five years?
    - How much adult education would that money buy?
    - Why do you think we as a society are more willing to pay for prisons rather than for people's education?
  5. *It would benefit every man, woman, and child in this country, and endanger nobody, if we took all the prisoners out of prisons, demolished the prisons, and replaced them with small, locked, and secure residential schools and colleges, therapeutic communities, and only put people in them who committed serious violent crimes.*
    - What evidence does Gilligan use to back up this claim?
    - Do you think sending criminals to college is a good way to reduce crime? What is your opinion on how to reform violent criminals?
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