

Date: 10/16/2019 5:49:33 AM

HARLAN RICHARDS

October 14, 2019

The Meaning of Life: The Case For Abolishing Life Sentences
By Marc Mauer & Ashley Nellis

A Book Review

This book is a must-read for anyone who wants to know what's really going on with The Mass Incarceration Movement. It documents in incredible detail every facet of mass incarceration and the progress of our country from being on the verge of abolishing prisons in the early 1970s to having the highest incarceration rate of any Western Democracy and the most citizens serving life sentences.

There is so much information in this book that I am going to write several blogs about it so I can include more details. The authors eloquently say what I would like to say to every parole commission member, DOC official and uninformed citizen about the devastation the Mass Incarceration Movement has caused since its inception in the 1980s.

Let me start with a listing of the chapter titles. That will give you an overview of the depth and breadth of the book.

1. Life By the Numbers.
2. Policies That Drive Life Sentences.
3. Doing Life.
4. "Death Is Different"
5. The American Commitment to Punishment.
6. The Meaning of Life Around the World.
7. The Racial Meaning of Life.
8. The Meaning of Life For Criminal Justice Reform.
9. The Meaning of Life For Public Safety.

10. Enacting a Twenty-Year Maximum Sentence.

11. The Future of Life In America.

Chapter 1 discusses imprisonment statistics which highlight the massive increase in incarceration rates as a result of the Mass Incarceration Movement. Numerous studies have shown that the increases in incarceration rates and length of time served had absolutely nothing to do with public safety. It was entirely politically motivated.

In the early 1970s, there were 200,000 people in state and federal prisons. now there are 1.5 million prisoners and over 200,000 lifers of which 50,000 are serving life without parole (LWOP). By comparison, Great Britain had a total of 50 prisoners serving LWOP.

In 1984, there were 34,000 lifers in the .U.S.; by 1992, there were 69,000. The current incarceration rate for lifers is 64 per 100,000 citizens. To put this in perspective, that rate is greater than the incarceration rate for ALL crimes for Denmark, Finland and Sweden.

In 2016, Wisconsin had 1,413 lifers which was 12.7% of the total prison population. Crime has been steadily decreasing over the last 25 years but the prison population (and number of lifers) in Wisconsin is still steadily increasing. That may begin to change soon. Governor Tony Evers took office in January 2019 with promises to cut the prison population in half. However, that may not be easy. The Republicans gerrymandered legislative districts in 2010 and until the next census in 2020 permits the redrawing of legislative districts, Republicans will continue to have large majorities in the legislature. For those who are unaware, Republicans are the ones who feel it is more important to build more prisons than to fund the State's university system. Republican state senators have been delaying confirmation of Gov. Evers' appointees. The DOC secretary was finally confirmed last week and the chairman of the parole commission is still waiting for his confirmation hearing to be scheduled. The reason for the delay is so Republicans can keep control over the appointee's actions. Once an appointee is confirmed, he can't be removed except by the governor. However if he does something the senators don't like before the confirmation hearing, they can simply vote against his confirmation resulting in his removal from office. Republicans are angry over losing the 2018 elections and are following a scorched earth policy to defeat the will of the people.

I'll write more in my next posting.