

# Why we should focus more on rehabilitation than punishment

[As French philosopher Michel Foucault puts it](#), the late 18th century saw prisons starting to employ methods aimed at 'disciplining the soul', in combination with punishment, in an attempt to build a better and more progressive society. One method used to correct behaviour in this way is rehabilitation - [the action of restoring someone to health or normal life through training and therapy](#). This is an important part of the justice system because it has been suggested that rehabilitation programmes (i.e. vocational training and mental health support) reduce recidivism rates in the long term, and this has both economic and philosophical benefits. However, reduced recidivism rates are not seen in the short-term, and this means that there may be a lack of incentive for political parties to implement rehabilitation policies in favour of harsher punishment. This is problematic because it means that society will ultimately lose out on the long-term benefits of reduced-recidivism rates. Therefore, whilst punishment is an important element of justice, without rehabilitation, society loses out in the long-term; this illustrates why we should focus more on rehabilitation than punishment.

Starting with economics; we should focus more on rehabilitation due to the long-term economic benefits caused by its positive impact on recidivism rates. This positive impact is shown through the results of schemes such as 'Operation Checkpoint'. This scheme allowed relatively low-harm offenders to avoid prosecution if they participated in a rehabilitation programme that addressed their causes of offending. It was concluded that 'Operation Checkpoint' [reduced recidivism rates by 15%](#); such a reduction can have several economic benefits. Firstly, reduced recidivism rates decrease long-term costs, and this is evidenced by the operation's cost of [just £480,000 a year and a saving of at least £2 million a year for every 1000 offenders in reduced crime](#). Secondly, reduced recidivism rates also help to sustain economic growth. This is because, if recidivism rates decrease, the number of prisoners will inevitably fall, and (as prisoners are economically inactive) this will lead to an increase in labour supply. This will enable the economy to expand and GDP to rise, sustaining economic growth. Therefore, our focus ought to be on funding rehabilitation because, whilst the positive results may take time to show, the reduced recidivism rates it causes have positive long-term benefits for society.

One philosophical argument for increased focus on rehabilitation can be found in the prevalent normative ethical theory - virtue ethics. This moral approach, which was founded by Aristotle and remains extremely popular, prescribes that an agent ought to act in the same way as an ideally virtuous person would in a similar situation. We enquire to understand what we ought to do and how we need to act as we learn to become virtuous. Rehabilitation is consistent with this idea that learning is possible, important and that it can result in human progression. As humans, our drive to improve and be better is something we all share. The very purpose of rehabilitation supports this characteristic and, in Aristotle's words, allows us the chance to 'flourish'. In this way, the philosophy of rehabilitation relates more closely to our own moral standards and methods than punishment, thus making it an approach that we ought to favour pursuing.

Turning to politics, leading politicians often take a tough stance on crime as harsh rhetoric and policy play well with the electorate. For example, in August 2019, Boris Johnson, who would go on to win the UK General Election later that year, argued for [longer sentences for](#)

[violent and sexual offenders](#). Johnson was immediately, and rightly, accused of 'playing politics'. There is no evidence to suggest that longer sentences act as an effective deterrent for criminals nor that they equate to reduced reoffending. Yet, even if it doesn't aid the justice system, it appeals to voters desiring security and reassurance. In reality, the public would be safer if their government focused more on rehabilitation measures as the evidence shows that there would be less reoffending, less victims and less overcrowding in prisons. Such results would, of course, be electorally popular. However, prison reform will take longer than a 5-year term in Parliament, thus making it an unpopular policy to pursue for office-seeking parties. Another benefit of rehabilitation is in its recognition of inequality in society. Whilst solely punitive methods fail to consider the social context of a criminal, rehabilitation accepts that the actions of offenders are affected by their lived experiences. Plus, beyond recognition, rehabilitation aims to repair social inequalities via skills programmes and treatment for addictions. These benefits make rehabilitation a more thoughtful and effective strategy than punishment in making the long-term improvements to which the justice system aspires.

A full exploration of why we ought to focus more on rehabilitation than punishment would require more than a single article. Here, we have left numerous arguments, from both sides, undiscussed. However, what is clear is that there are strong reasons within the disciplines of philosophy, politics and economics that suggest that our focus ought to be on rehabilitation if we want to achieve long-term improvements. Conceptually, rehabilitation works - the challenge is how we turn theory into reality.

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