

AMERICAN JAILS --

“There is a difference between prisons and jails and it does matter”

Most people make no distinction between “*jail*” and “*prison.*” Many people use the terms interchangeably. Their lowest common denominator is that they both incarcerate men and women. Essentially, *jails* and *prisons* are very different and anyone who has been in both can tell you that the environments are unique.

- ❑ In the USA, *jails* are short-term, holding facilities for first-timers or rookies with minor offenses and are stopovers on the way to *prison.*
- ❑ Most offenders go to *jail* numerous times before they ever “hit the big time” joint. By the time an individual gets to *prison*, he or she has often had three to five *jail* visits.
- ❑ Depending on the offense, *jails* can keep people for one hour, one day or several months but usually, not more than a year and a half at a time.
- ❑ On the other hand, *prisons* usually keep people any where from a year to life or hold them on death row.
- ❑ *Jails* have a rapid turnover in population, weekend and work release folks, typically are safer and more drug free, have a more controlled environment, and are located geographically closer to the offender’s home.
- ❑ *Prisons*, on the other hand, have more long-term populations, are often more prone to violence, a more chaotic environment, are known for the availability of drugs, and usually are a greater distance from the offender’s home.

“Jails do not a prison make” -- unless their unique role and opportunity is wasted.

Typically jails in America are *holding tanks* where inmates sit and wait for court, do short sentences or wait to be transferred, often unexpectedly to them, to prison for longer sentences. **THIS OPPORTUNITY IS BEING WASTED!**

WHAT IS HAPPENING NOW: When early minor brushes with the law do not bring attention to the needs of the individual which contribute to criminal behavior, the individual re-offends and goes to jail. Here the journey begins and the revolving door starts. A high percentage of these women and men have alcohol and drug problems, and the jail may provide their first chance to be drug and alcohol free in years. Lacking educational, vocational, and social skills, as well as life skills in how to manage in the world, addicted and damaged by life traumas – these women and men are in need of help, not punishment. Therapists call these “acting out” behaviors indicative of social, emotional, and relational developmental delay. What an opportunity to assess and begin to address the very issues which, left untreated, will “SLAM” the door behind the individual for longer and longer periods of time. When this happens, everybody (the offender, victims of crime, families, society, tax payers) loses.

As the stepchild of the correctional system, jails have been over-looked, wasted, ignored by communities and government. The AMERICAN JAIL ASSOCIATION (AJA) represents the cutting edge force that is moving jails into the forefront of an effort to avert the tragedy of “wasted days and wasted nights.” In contrast, the momentum of the prison-industrial complex is to continue business as usual. AJA brings hope, reason, training, and innovations to jails -- these words have not regularly been associated with jails. Without a doubt jails offer an opportunity for *early intervention and prevention*. In a cost-effective manner, jails can be a window of opportunity for offenders to be assessed, educated, treated and trained for release into a productive life. Effective reduction of recidivism will take money and jobs away from the jail-to-prison industrial complex. A goal for any human service agency is to “work ourselves out of a job”, however, our correctional system today controls the supply and demand. Therefore, our ethics and integrity required that we address the costly mistakes in our American system of justice.

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Also, see AMERICAN JAILS, The Magazine of the American Jail Association, Ken Kerle, Ph.D., Managing Editor or go to www.corrections.com/aja