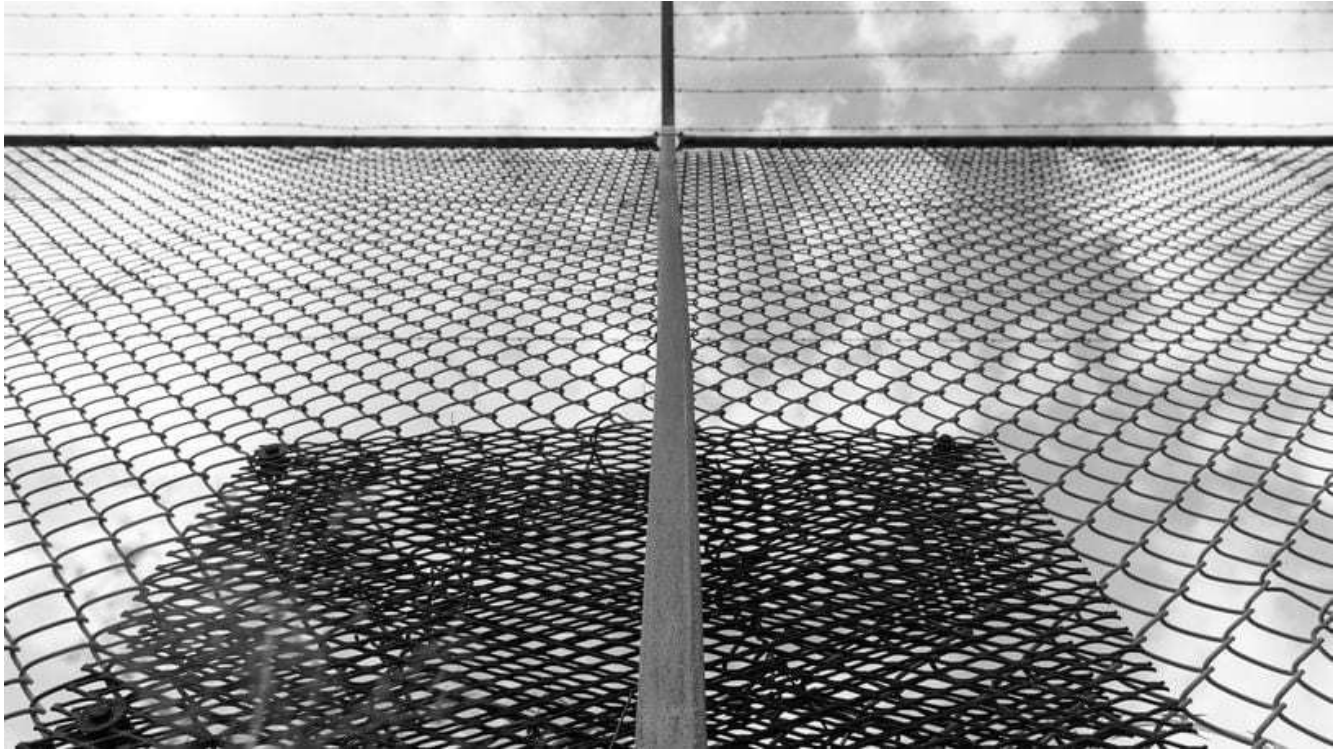


Prisons are breeding grounds for crime too



Not to mention a severe shortage of corrections officers and staff.



I applaud the newspaper's project and the powerful, related opinion pieces building on what the journalists have discovered regarding deplorable housing conditions and the impact on us all.

As stated in a recent editorial about at-risk tenants who live in these places, "Georgia's law enforcement agencies are already locking up plenty of criminals who boldly ply their trade at these troubled apartment communities."

And Editor Kevin Riley is correct in writing recently that, “We won’t solve our crime problem without addressing the terrible conditions that attract crime and expose children to an unimaginable amount of violence.” Doing so requires acknowledging that the “drug dealers, gang members and squatters” are a product of our failure to fix what went wrong with those persons.

Here is what locking up plenty of criminals looks like: we arrest, punish, incarcerate and release a more traumatized person who goes right back to the very properties you are reporting on. Hence, this is why our recidivism rates hover at 30% year-in and year-out.

So, why on earth would we not want to solve the problem that led to the crime, thereby eliminating such crime?

This question can also be answered quite simply in two parts.

One: If there was no crime, the tactic of selling us “law and order” would have no influence on how we behave as voters. And two: Eliminating the causes of crime through rehabilitation and repair, focuses too much on doing something for other people.

We have historically been led to think this would be giving something to those who take. We can call it the just-keep-them-away-from-me syndrome.

Here again, we’ve learned from our historical folly that eventually their dark, empty, useless sentences come to an end, and they come home to places like rundown apartment complexes and desperate living – yet again. Oh, and they come home more seasoned as criminals, having had the worst of their inclinations slow-cooked in a corrections system that we all know does not correct.

More crime. More theatre. And goody, more recycled need for the song of “law and order.”

Sad for us all, this is not a new conversation. Scores of research projects, studies, explored best practices and isolated policies make more than adequately strong cases for reducing crime by prosecuting, sentencing and incarcerating people to actually change behavior and mitigate factors that germinate criminal tendencies.

The playbooks are plentiful. We’re just short on will and demand.

Maybe our lawmakers should ask themselves these questions: Where do the “criminals” go upon their return to metro Atlanta? Will those released successfully reintegrate into a society that far too many of them are woefully unprepared to navigate? Will they receive “help” in the form of mental health services, substance abuse treatment, or hard- and soft-skills training? Will we continue treating them with the “not in my backyard” mentality by sending them running back to dangerous dwellings?

It is all intertwined: Failing schools, lack of parental resources, mass incarceration, mental illness, substance-use disorder, housing discrimination, barriers to employment and general public apathy.

So, the next time a politician sings to you the words “Vote for me and I will get these criminals off the street ...,” demand an answer to these questions: How will you do that? When you get them off the street, what will you do to orchestrate with others ways to actually change what they will do after they finish their sentenced time? What single-digit recidivism rate will you promise under your leadership?

They will probably try to dodge or spin away from the full order of these questions.

As they do, remember in that moment that what can be done next is up to you.

Kate Boccia is founder, president and CEO of the Alpharetta-based National Incarceration Association, which advocates for criminal justice reforms.