

# Impact of Immigration and Americanization on Correctional Education

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Illiterate, docile, lacking in self-reliance and initiative, and not possessing the Anglo-Teutonic conceptions of law, order, and government, their coming has served to dilute tremendously our national stock, and to corrupt our civic life....[Our task is] to assimilate and amalgamate these people as part of our American races and to implant in their children, so far as can be done, the Anglo-Saxon conception of righteousness, and order, and popular government, and to awaken in them a reverence for our democratic institutions and for those things in our national life which we as a people hold to be of abiding worth. (Cubberly on the southern and eastern European immigrants of the late 1800s, in Cremin, 1961, p. 68).

## Introduction

The late 19th and early 20th centuries in the United States were a time of rapid progress and confusion. The industrial revolution was changing the nature and shape of America. Huge cities were being formed, from population explosions of massive immigration from foreign countries and emigration of recently freed slaves from the South. Reform movements became a regular part of the American scene. Successful abolitionist and temperance movements made people believe in the power of organized change efforts.

One perceived side effect of modern society was an increase in the number of "defective," criminal, and disabled people. Some persons designated as defective or criminal were different because their cultures were distinct from the northern European Protestants who controlled Eastern cities. The waves of immigrants flowing into the United States were from southern and eastern Europe, often not literate in their own languages. Most particularly, their religion was not Protestant but Catholic or Jewish.

Also, many more defective people were identified for the first time because livelihoods had changed in the new society. Immigrants who had eked out a living in Old World agrarian nations found themselves poorly prepared for the large United States urban centers. Persons with limited intelligence or emotional problems had not been as identifiable in rural farming communities, where there had always been jobs for poorly skilled people. As long as one had a strong back, he could make a contribution. He may not own a farm, but he could

work on someone else's farm. In a factory system requiring some level of ability, people who could not meet their obligations were more easily identified.

The poor, immigrant, and disabled were particularly feared by the upper middle and ruling classes. They were seen as a potential threat to the fabric of American culture. All kinds of causes for defectiveness were identified at the time from being intoxicated during conception, to coming from a certain immigrant group (e.g., the "natural" proclivity toward alcoholism of the Irish), to the voyage from the Old World (Katz, 1968). Newly arrived immigrants were considered inherently more likely to be criminal, defective, or delinquent.

In addition, there were millions of immigrants coming to the United States. It was not uncommon during the middle decades of the 19th century for 40-45% of an Eastern city's population to be foreign born (BPDS, 1972/1855, p.485). And these groups continued to multiply—by sheer numbers they would eventually affect "normal" Americans. The America the founding fathers had struggled for was changing, in ways that frightened many.

There were several efforts directed toward solving the problems of increasing immigration, crime, and defectiveness. The notions of what Americans had done to become a great nation led to the idea of these problems, too, could be solved through "democratic cooperation" (Griffin, 1967, p. 37). The scientific and technological advances of which Americans were so proud could provide answers to increasing defectiveness. Some efforts centered on immigration laws, where severe limits were placed on the number of people allowed in the United States. A second effort was the establishment of marriage laws, which prohibited certain groups from marrying, thus diminishing their procreation. In this way, it was thought, defectiveness and criminality could be wiped out in the current generation. However, limits on marriage were largely unsuccessful because unmarried people continued to have children. A third effort was called eugenics, or the "science of human betterment" (*Buck v. Bell*, 1924). Eugenics resulted in the mass sterilization of presumed defective and criminal peoples in the United States. In some prisons the officer on the cell block was the person who decided which inmates got sterilized. In addition, for those who might be improved, education was seen as another method of enhancing the abilities of immigrant children and adults.

## Public School Efforts

Attention on the children of immigrants was considered a good method of reducing crime, defectiveness, and delinquency. Increased immigration created problems in the United States for most public services, including public education. School was the initial social experience for large heterogeneous groups of children. In his study of the public school system in the late 1800s, Tyack (1980) found that public schools were seriously overburdened. They faced enormous problems as a result of immigrant population increases.

Schools were becoming larger, more complex systems, with a wider variety of services to meet the needs of increasing numbers of students. They could not be built fast enough to accommodate population increases, and materials and supplies were often in short supply. The school systems, in attempting to deal with increasing demands, developed procedures to sort students into curriculum tracks. A focus on vocational training seemed an appropriate alternative for some students, especially those who could not succeed in the standard curriculum. These classes were often filled with poor and immigrant students, channeled into special classes for "hands on" training.

Schools were seen as an important way to teach immigrant youngsters to become American and to help them find their proper place in the workforce. This was the social and political purpose of the school—education for the new industrial society (Tyack, 1980). Tyack and Hansot (1982) reported that

During the middle decades of the nineteenth century the common school crusaders like Horace Mann sought to translate Americans' diffuse faith in education into support for a particular institutional form, the public school....The common school was to be moral and religious in impact but it was not to be sectarian; it was to provide sound political instruction without being partisan. (1982)

The development of a common public school function was hotly debated during the middle years of the 19th century. The public school pattern was adopted widely because it met many goals of dominant social groups. Its mission had always been the perpetuation of American culture. In addition, its aim became one of comprehensive education and moral development. The public school might bring together diverse cultures that were arriving in the United States, to make proper Americans out of their children.

Interestingly, this effort also led to the development of the reform school in the later part of the century. Those who failed in public schools were often sentenced to reform schools. The children of poor, minority, and immigrant parents were a particular challenge for the public school system. Their education needs were frequently left unmet. Many students dropped out of school (Tyack called them "push outs," 1980). Some of these youngsters wandered around the urban centers stealing bread, upsetting fruit carts, and snatching purses. Roving "gangs" were seen as increasingly dangerous. Such bands were identified as one symptom of the problems of modern society, and something needed to be done about them. Thus the reform school was developed as a way to train such delinquents.

Reform schools were similar in scope and mission to the adult reformatories that followed. It was thought that problem children required industrial and reform schools that were more restrictive than public schools. Industrial schools for the pre-delinquent were originally designed for girls but were soon established for boys as well

(Bremmer, 1971). The pre-delinquent was usually a child of poor parents for whom no other placement was available or one who was deemed too young to attend reform school. Both the industrial and reform school ideas were borrowed from the work of Mary Carpenter (1970/1851), a British prison reformer who focused on education for juvenile delinquents.

Reform schools were initially designed to be educational institutions, not penal. They were to provide educational reform, capable of breaking the cycle of crime that the child had, or might soon, embarked upon (Katz, 1968). Reform schools, like early prisons, were designed for the reform purpose of training students to lead productive, law-abiding lives. This was entirely consistent with the public school mission. Institutional schools, however, were not always able to maintain an educational orientation. Frequently they became punishment oriented.

The reform school concept included compulsory education as part of its repertoire of institutional procedures. Even before compulsory education became a local public school strategy, it was considered appropriate in reform schools. The reform school was the first form of compulsory education in the United States (Katz, 1968). Compulsory education ensured that problem students would receive education and training. When transferred to public schools, an additional purpose was to ensure that youngsters were off the streets during the school day.

#### **Americanization**

Efforts to cope with the diverse cultures of adult immigrants took a somewhat similar form. Classes for learning English, the United States Constitution and legal system, and the American way of life were taught at night by vast numbers of local organizations. Some of these were thinly veiled programs to make immigrants more like the Americans who had arrived earlier, although many provided real support for lonely immigrants eager for contact with others from home (Addams, 1893, p. 8)

Immigrant groups themselves fostered programs to help their compatriots assimilate. These often took the form of social clubs, allowing immigrants to spend time in familiar settings, with cultural accoutrements they found comfortable, while catching up on news from home.

The effort to Americanize immigrants ranged from teaching them English to training them for industrial work. Americanization was considered a method of combating the poor effects of their inherited stock, as well as the negative side effects of the immigration process. Education in the form of night and adult school was employed for adult workers as it had been for immigrant children (Cremin, 1961; Rothman, 1971).

One problem that occurred during the Americanization movement was that children assimilated much faster than their parents, often learning English quite rapidly. They became the family voice to the outside

world. This sometimes led to a breakdown of authority within the family. Children would be embarrassed by their parents and failed to obey them. A result was the increased abandonment of values from the Old World and limited acceptance by the New.

### **Immigrant Inmates**

Arriving immigrant groups found themselves represented in prison populations in direct relation to the period of their arrival. The theory of ethnic succession, developed to explain waves of immigration into the slums of Northeastern American cities, also reflected the prison population. The most recently arrived immigrant group moved into the center of the city, to the worst slum. When the next immigrant group arrived, they moved into the center slum, thus allowing the previous group to move to the next, and slightly better, level. This pattern can be seen in the prison composition of the mid to late 19th century. Each new arriving group made up not only the city slum population but the prison population as well. That group was considered the most criminal, most intellectually retarded, most defective, until the next group arrived.

In the 1850s Irish immigrants were the most criminal, defective, and retarded. By 1909, southern Italians were the most retarded (63.6% of them), with Polish immigrants a close second (58%) (Katz, 1968, p. 176; Tyack, 1980, p. 242). The Irish immigrant had by 1900 moved up one level higher, becoming the stereotypical "Irish cop on the beat," moving from the highest population in prison to the street policeman. Children born of "mixed" parentage (one parent foreign born, one parent native born) were also considered at very high risk for delinquency (Ericksson, 1976, p. 619).

The high representation of foreign born prison inmates was typified by the following from Elmira Reformatory. Elmira inmates were from New York State, usually New York City. They reflected every nationality and ethnicity and were mostly poor. Elmira superintendent Brockway mentioned in 1870 that there was an immigrant problem, so we know he was aware of the issue before the Reformatory was opened in 1876 (Wines, 1871, p. 42). Reformatory records provided specific information on every incoming inmate, but no mention was made of nationality in the early annual reports. Nationality was cited only after 1880.

There may be several reasons for this omission. It may be that immigration and its perceived association with crime was not yet fully developed. The increase in the number of immigrants was certainly identified by 1876, but the link to crime was not yet articulated nor widely accepted.

If fewer immigrants went to Elmira, the court system may have tried to ensure success for the Reformatory by excluding "undesireables"—those identified as insane, idiot, or defective. Experimental, educational programs may have been deemed appropriate for the native born American. By 1898, however, Spanish visitor Dorado

reported that "run of the mill" men came to the Reformatory, not special cases (p. 23).

In 1886 there was reference to problems with an inmate after release and that he had come from Germany four years before being incarcerated (State of NY 1887, p.22). It was not until 1890, however, that Elmira Reformatory annual reports mentioned special classes for non-English speaking inmates, with an announcement about remedial classes for Germans, Italians, and French students (State of New York Board of Managers, 1891, pp. 40-42).

There were discussions regarding the influence of immigration on the prison population in 1892 and statistics on the backgrounds of all inmates arriving at the Reformatory since its opening in 1876. "Colored" inmates were divided into the categories of Negroes and Mulattos (179), Chinese (4), and Indians (2). There were 5,714 Whites, 4,521 of whom had been born in the United States. The large number of inmates born in the United States in part reflected the effects restrictive immigration laws of the late 1800s. For the foreign born (1,163), records identified the country of origin. In addition, native born inmates were categorized according to their parents' country of origin (State of NY, 1893, pp. 47-49).

The 1892 Elmira Reformatory Annual Report placed the blame of crime squarely on the shoulders of European immigrants (p. 48), although some of the instructors at the Reformatory were also foreign born ("Cruelty Charges Disproved," 1894). Reformatories, reform schools, and prisons took the responsibility for educating immigrant criminals in appropriate work ethics and American character ideals. Programs in the prisons, like those in public and reform schools, were designed to help criminals adjust to modern American society and contribute to the community. These efforts alone would save the American democratic experiment.

### **Summary**

It is difficult to avoid making comparisons to current efforts directed toward immigration and criminality. Although the ethnicity of people assumed to be criminal and ignorant has changed, the arguments now given for limiting immigration are largely the same. The differences seem to lie in who constitutes the dominant culture. Today's critics of immigration are largely those whose forefathers had been seen as defective or criminal in the past. This seems to be the danger of identifying any one group as more likely to be criminal than another; the most ardent critic may have at one time fallen into the "criminal and dangerous" classes.

[Defective people]...considered in themselves, ...seem scarcely worth saving. But from social considerations it is necessary to save such people, that society may be perpetuated....[T]he weak must be cared for or they will eventually destroy or counteract the efforts of the strong. We need social sanitation, which is the ultimate

aim of the study of social pathology.  
(Blackmoor, 1897).

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**Biographical Sketch**

Carolyn Eggleston, Ph.D., has been active in correctional and correctional/special education since 1975, in Virginia, New York, California, and on special assignments in other states. She served as co-editor of this *Journal*, leader of the CEA Special Interest Group for Special Educators, chair of the CEA President's Council, and editor of the *Yearbook of Correctional Education*. Carolyn is a director of the Center for the Study of Correctional Education at California State University, where she can be reached at (909) 880-5654; FAX (909) 880-7010; E mail: egglesto@wiley.csusb.edu.

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