

**BEYOND ‘WHAT WORKS?’  
A 25 YEAR JUBILEE RETROSPECTIVE OF  
ROBERT MARTINSON**

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## Abstract

The story behind the publication of American sociologist Robert Martinson's famous 1974 article entitled 'What Works? Questions and Answers About Prison Reform' provides researchers, policy-makers and observers with a sobering reminder of the possibilities of research findings and conclusions assuming an inappropriate life of their own. The reification of the concept of 'Nothing Works' provides the lesson that research is not immune from the dangers of socially constructed realities. This paper explores briefly the origins of the article, Martinson as a member of an academic team, and the events in the USA and Australia on the subject of rehabilitation since.

## Introduction: Martinson and 1974

In the late 1960s in the USA a large number of rehabilitation evaluations were reviewed by the New York sociologist Robert Martinson<sup>1</sup> in the company of two research colleagues. 25 years ago this year, his interpretations of the results were published in a now famous article in the journal *The Public Interest*, entitled 'What Works?' Not dissimilar to his earlier expressed views on the subject<sup>2</sup>, the 1974 article is historically regarded as debunking the idea that it is possible to rehabilitate prison inmates, indeed, to reform any criminals at all.

What did Martinson actually say? He wrote:

“... with few and isolated exceptions, the rehabilitative efforts that have been reported so far have had no appreciable effect on recidivism”. (1974: 25)

Moreover,

“our present strategies ... cannot overcome, or even appreciably reduce, the powerful tendencies of offenders to continue in criminal behavior”. (1974: 49)

Martinson's skepticism of the rehabilitation ideal derived from his role from 1968-1970 in a survey of American studies on offender rehabilitation. The researchers reviewed 231 evaluations conducted from 1945 to 1967. At this time it had long been assumed that rehabilitation and diversionary endeavours were crucial underpinnings of reform efforts<sup>3</sup>. Martinson's critique appeared to have destroyed this assumption. It was not long before the report became nicknamed, “Nothing Works!”<sup>4</sup> His conclusions were soon treated as fact (Lipton 1998: 2).

Paradoxically, the idea that nothing worked in rehabilitating offenders appealed to Left and Right alike (Cullen and Gendreau 1989). The Left was concerned with the injustices of sentencing that accepted the idea that rehabilitation may require indeterminate lengths of incarceration and forced treatment. The Right favoured anything that did not discourage retribution in sentencing. Indeed, if nothing worked, then longer prison terms and capital

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<sup>1</sup> Martinson himself was no stranger to controversy, nor to the inside of a prison cell. Arrested as a civil rights 'Freedom Rider', he had spent 40 days in the maximum security unit of Mississippi's Parchman State Penitentiary.

<sup>2</sup> In 1972 he had written, in a four part series in the liberal *New Republic*, that “the representative array of correctional treatments has no appreciable effect - positive or negative - on rates of recidivism of convicted offenders.” (Martinson 1972) The irony was that Martinson thought his well-publicized skepticism about rehabilitation would empty most prisons, since prisons could not be reformed. That was not to be the interpretation of those who reviewed his findings.

<sup>3</sup> Diversion is another topic entirely and its successes and failures require further retrospection eg. Sarre 1999.

<sup>4</sup> Variations on this theme are found in the titles and bodies of a number of research articles, eg. Gendreau *et al* 1996, Myers 1980, Palmer 1975, Wilson 1980.

punishment became easier for the Right to sell. To a nation emerging from the Vietnam War and faced with an unruly youth and drug culture, “nothing works” became a slogan for the times (Miller 1989<sup>5</sup>). It should surprise no one, then, that the article’s conclusions received widespread publicity.

### **‘What Works?’ in context**

It is important, however, to put ‘What Works?’ in context. Martinson was only one of three researchers to undertake the survey, which was finished in 1970 but not published for five years as *The Effectiveness of Correctional Treatment* (Lipton *et al* 1975). Though the survey came to be essentially identified with Martinson’s name, he had joined the research team only after they were well into their work. The senior author was Dr Doug Lipton and their co-author was Judith Wilks. They reviewed such programs as intensive supervision, psychotherapy, group therapy, vocational training, educational approaches, medical interventions, and other correctional-based rehabilitation programs that had been systematically evaluated. The report assessed the effects of these treatments on recidivism, institutional adjustment, educational achievement, drug re-addiction, psychological change and other outcomes. Unknown to Lipton and Wilks, Martinson published the now famous article peremptorily and without their specific consent.

In fact, the final 1975 report concluded that “the field of corrections has not *as yet* found satisfactory ways to reduce recidivism *by significant amounts* (Lipton *et al* 1975: 627) (my emphasis). This was, of course, a far more guarded conclusion, and left open the door for further rehabilitative optimism. These 1975 findings were then reviewed by the National Academy of Sciences in the form of an assessment by a Panel on Research on Rehabilitative Techniques. In their judgment, “Lipton, Martinson and Wilks were ... accurate and fair in their appraisal of the rehabilitation literature” (Sechrest *et al* 1979: 5, 31, cited in Lipton 1998: 5). The Panel (and therefore the Academy) tempered Martinson’s 1974 opinion by stating, “we do not now know of any program or method of rehabilitation that could be *guaranteed* to reduce the criminal activity of released offenders” (Sechrest *et al* 1979: 3, cited in Lipton 1998: 6). (Lipton emphasis)

While the 1974 article was very well written and persuasively argued, it can be shown, with the value of hindsight, to have had a number of flaws, principally in providing insufficient qualification for the conclusions reached. For example, many rehabilitative programs reviewed and regarded as failures by Martinson were simply those that were starved of funds and which could never have provided the services they purported to provide. Moreover, there is a view that the debilitating aspects of prison life would always outweigh the ‘aversive’ rehabilitation programs effects (eg. Vito and Allen 1981). In other words, while some rehabilitation may have worked, it could be easily subverted by the criminogenic effects of its deliverer (Sarre 1984, 1991).

There is also the matter of how one assesses ‘success’ or ‘failure’. The 1974 appraisal simply tested programs against re-arrest and conviction rates and did not consider the winding down of an offender’s criminal activity. Nor did it consider the difficulty posed by the lack of custodial choices. It did not consider the possibilities posed by replication and meta-analyses

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<sup>5</sup> At that time, many people considered rehabilitation to be the main aim imprisonment (Hall 1996:400). But as Miller (1989) writes, “... if budgets were any measure, rehabilitation was a straw man. There has never been a rehabilitative era in American corrections. Most correctional systems had few, if any trained psychiatrists, psychologists, or social workers. Virtually all correctional budgets went to staff that operated traditional prisons, jails and reform schools. What looked to outsiders like permissiveness was more often neglect and chaos in a system overcome with an explosion of ‘baby-boomers.’” See also DiIulio (1991).

in a variety of settings. It did not test ‘program integrity’, a common contemporary tool in determining the worth of an initiative (McGuire and Priestley 1993). Martinson had drawn his conclusions selectively from the broader study, using only the evidence that was unduly pessimistic (Lipton 1998: 3).

Indeed, a year before his death, Martinson recanted in an article in the *Hofstra Law Review*. He pointed to a plethora of rehabilitative models that had proven effective with offenders. He wrote that,

“... some treatment programs do have an appreciable effect on recidivism”. (1979: 244)

and, further,

“[s]uch startling results are found again and again in our study, for treatment programs as diverse as individual psychotherapy, group counseling, intensive supervision, and what we have called individual/help (aid, advice, counseling).” (1979: 255)

The man who had started it all had come full circle. But by now, no one was listening. Late one gloomy winter afternoon in 1980, the manic depressive Martinson took his own life when he jumped from the window of his Manhattan apartment while his teenage son looked on from across the room.

### **The last decade**

In 1987, Gendreau and Ross published a survey of over 200 studies on rehabilitation conducted from 1981-1987, many of which used mathematical methodology not available to the earlier researchers. Gendreau and Ross concluded:

“Our reviews of the research literature demonstrated that successful rehabilitation of offenders had been accomplished, and continued to be accomplished quite well. ... [R]eductions in recidivism, sometimes as substantial as 80 percent, had been achieved in a considerable number of well-controlled studies. Effective programs were conducted in a variety of community and (to a lesser degree) institutional settings, involving pre-delinquents, hard-core adolescent offenders, and recidivistic adult offenders, including criminal heroin addicts. The results of these programs were not short-lived; follow-up periods of at least two years were not uncommon, and several studies reported even longer follow-ups.” (Gendreau and Ross 1987).

In short, many things ‘worked’. However, the policy legacy for rehabilitation in the USA was already etched in stone. Despite any rear-guard action, rehabilitation was already doomed in the face of official mistrust of its effectiveness. The same year of the Gendreau and Ross publication, and a full thirteen years post-Martinson, then Attorney-General Edwin Meese referred to the “substantially discredited theory of rehabilitation” (Meese 1987: 3, cited in Lipton 1998: 6). His views echoed those of the Director of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Alfred Regnery, who had spoken two years earlier of the “folly of rehabilitation”, adding, “... since [Martinson], rehabilitation has sunk further in esteem ... the criminal justice system has all but given up on the concept. Virtually no successful juvenile programs – those that reduce recidivism to an appreciable degree – rely on rehabilitation” (Regnery 1985: 3 cited in Lipton 1998: 6).

Moreover, a full fifteen years after the publication of ‘What Works?’, on January 18, 1989, the virtual abandonment of rehabilitation in corrections was confirmed by the US Supreme Court. In *Mistretta v. United States*<sup>6</sup>, the Court upheld federal sentencing guidelines<sup>7</sup> that had removed the goal of rehabilitation from serious consideration when sentencing offenders. Defendants could henceforth be sentenced strictly for the crime, with no recognition given to such factors as amenability to treatment, personal and family history, or previous efforts toward rehabilitation. The Court outlined the history of the debate as follows: “Rehabilitation as a sound penological theory came to be questioned and, in any event, was regarded by some as an unattainable goal for most cases”<sup>8</sup>. The Court cited a Senate Report that referred to the ‘outmoded rehabilitation model’ for federal criminal sentencing, and stated that the efforts of the criminal justice system to achieve rehabilitation of offenders had failed. This was, there can be little doubt, a reference to Martinson’s conclusions.

The ‘nothing works’ legacy has not been confined to North America. In Australia, too, it is difficult to find enthusiasm for the goal of rehabilitation in official sentencing policy (Tomaino 1999: 160). There has been a resurgence of retributivism as the “pre-eminent response to crime” (Braithwaite and Pettit 1990: 6). The contemporary punitive landscape is succinctly summarised by Freiberg and Ross when they stated, “harshness has replaced hope, retribution has replaced rehabilitation, and prevention has eroded proportionality” (1995: 138).

## Conclusion

A decade ago Cullen and Gendreau (1989) noted that “the doctrine of nothing works is best seen as a socially constructed reality [rather than] an established scientific truth”. The burial of rehabilitation as an aim of sentencing appears to have occurred before its death had even been announced. The pessimism of those anxious to farewell rehabilitative initiatives belies the evidence and optimism of the 1980s (eg. Gendreau and Ross 1987; Cullen and Gendreau 1989) which has been mirrored in the 1990s (eg. McGuire and Priestley 1992, Pitts 1992, McGuire 1995, Gendreau *et al* 1996, Lipton 1996, Dowden and Andrews 1999). Yet the Martinson legacy of ‘nothing works’ lives on.

The story of the reification of ‘nothing works’ should send an important message to researchers that their responsibility in qualifying their findings and tempering their conclusions can never be overstated. Researchers should keep in mind the cautions expressed in this context by John Barnes (1990) when he wrote that our thinking is really little more than models and interpretations, brought into the public arena for further debate. It is worth reflecting on that caution as we remember and acknowledge this important twenty-fifth jubilee.

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<sup>6</sup> No.87-7028. Argued October 5, 1988; Decided January 18, 1989. (1989) 488 US 361.

<sup>7</sup> The court held that the sentencing guidelines were not unconstitutional.

<sup>8</sup> (1989) 488 US 361 at 365.

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## **Research: Corrections: Martinson**