

## Reform in Prisons and Asylums 1

Up until the 1800's, most crimes were handled by local communities with the intention of making those committing crimes feel humiliation, pain, and guilt with the hope that it would deter the criminal from ever wanting to commit a crime again. Punishments were both public and severe. For example, a first-time thief would be whipped in the town square, a two-time offender would be required to pay triple the amount stolen and, in addition, be forced to stand on a gallows for several hours with a noose around his neck before receiving thirty lashes with a cat-o-nine-tails, and a third-time offender would be hanged. **2**

As America grew, larger state prisons were set up to hold the increasing number of criminals. These prisons, like Eastern State Penitentiary, were intended to intimidate prisoners. The conditions were horrible; murderers were thrown in with people who had spit in the street, and women, children and adult men were put together with no thoughts about the ramifications. Prisoners were often whipped, beaten, gagged, restrained, and thrown into solitary confinement (basically, a stone room with no furniture, windows, lights, or blankets) for large blocks of time. To make things worse, all supplies (food, water, etc.) were thrown into large rooms and subjected to a free-for-all which forced inmates to treat each other brutally in an attempt to survive. **3**

During the same years, those unfortunate people who were mentally-ill were treated like animals and hidden away from public view. Families, often embarrassed, kept their own mentally-ill children at home, often chained-up in a barn or outside like a dog. Later, these individuals were thrown into separate wings of the same, awful prisons that criminals were incarcerated in. These first "insane asylums" were like open prisons in which the mentally-ill were placed into large, community rooms with those deemed more "dangerous to others" chained to the floors or walls. Again, food and supplies were inadequate and placed in the rooms to be "shared" by all inside. Visits by family were rare; inmates were usually forgotten and remained in the asylums for life. **4**

In 1840-1841, a woman from Massachusetts named Dorothea Dix decided to investigate the treatment of both criminal and mentally-ill inmates in her state. Her investigation and subsequent report revealed that American society was ill-equipped to handle these people in a humane way. She reported the many abuses she had seen and argued that these institutions were underfunded, undertrained, and cruel places. Dix then spent many years traveling throughout America investigating its institutions. She spent her time doing interviews, publishing papers, and making speeches to state legislatures in an attempt to bring the problems to light and to obtain funding that would improve conditions. Thanks to her efforts, many states established more appropriate facilities for treating, not just locking-up, the mentally-ill. **5 + 6**

## Engagement Guide -- Reforms in Prisons and Asylums

1. Look at the pictures. What do you notice? List 7 things that would indicate that the conditions were "inhumane":

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2. What was the worst part of how prisoners were treated in prior to large prisons? (Explain why)

3. What was the worst part of how prisoners were treated in prisons? (Explain why)

4. Who had it worse -- criminals or the mentally-ill? (Explain why)

5. What should be the goal of our prisons: *punishment* or *rehabilitation*? In one paragraph, answer the question and give at least three (3) reasons that support your answer.

6. What should be the goal of our mental institutions: *punishment*, *rehabilitation*, or *something else*? In one paragraph, answer the question and give at least three (3) reasons that support your answer.