

A life sentence for selling drugs? Really?

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Her sentencing judge told Layne Pavey she would serve 20 months in a federal penitentiary for conspiracy to deliver cocaine.

But here's what the judge failed to disclose: The sentence would never end - even once Pavey walked away from the prison gates.

As the former Clarkston Junior Miss told Kerri Sandaine in Sunday's Tribune, the stigma of a felony conviction imprisoned her in a no-man's land of unemployment, bad credit and discrimination.

"Instead, every door was slamming in my face," Pavey said. "I finally got a job at a Domino's in Spokane because Dad knew the owner. My credit was shot and I was turned down everywhere I went for a job because I was a felon."

And in 21st-century America, that makes Pavey typical.

For starters, nobody does prisons like the United States of America - incarceration rate 693 per 100,000.

Not Cuba - incarceration rate 510 per 100,000.

Not Russia - incarceration rate 453 per 100,000.

Not Iran - incarceration rate 287 per 100,000.

Not Saudi Arabia - incarceration rate 161 per 100,000.

In case you're wondering, Idaho's incarceration rate comes in at 676 per 100,000; Washington ranks at 482 per 100,000.

For that, you can credit Presidents Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton, who waged wars on crime and drugs by imposing mandatory minimum sentences, truth in sentencing laws as well as three strikes and you're out provisions. The campaigns rounded up the drug addicted and the mentally ill, imprisoned more of them and kept them incarcerated longer.

As a result, the number of people behind bars in this country jumped 400 percent between 1975 and 2010 - to as many as 2.3 million.

Even with criminal justice reforms easing the national jail and prison population a bit in the last three or four years, it's estimated that between 65 million and 100 million Americans - as many

as one in three - have some kind of a criminal record: an arrest without conviction, a misdemeanor or a felony.

In the internet era, your criminal history is a mouse click away. There is no escape. There is no protection. Not only is it legal, but it is considered a sound business practice to close the door to anyone with a red flag in their background.

So 60 percent of former inmates still can't find a job a year after they've been released.

Those lucky enough to find work settle for much less: By the time he approaches age 48, the typical former inmate will have earned about \$179,000 less than someone without a conviction.

It's one thing to block a bank robber from taking a job at the teller's stand. What disqualifies him from baking pizzas?

Besides, we all pay for this.

Thanks to the war on crime and mass incarceration that came with it, 5 million more Americans are living in poverty.

Because former inmates struggle to make ends meet, the national economy is losing between \$57 billion and \$65 billion a year.

When a convicted felon can't find work, he's going to get money the only way he knows how.

Obviously, the best solution for the Layne Paveys of this world would be a court diversion program that gets them into substance abuse treatment and as far away as possible from the stigma of a felony conviction.

Short of that, however, why not "ban the box" - the box on the job application form that asks whether the prospective employee has ever been convicted of a felony.

Some 28 states - Idaho and Washington not among them - have taken that step. Nothing stops the boss from asking questions during an interview, but at least the newly released individual has a chance to explain himself.

And why are convicted felons deprived of their voting rights? They still pay taxes. They're subject to the rules set by society.

Stripping them of their franchise only makes it more difficult for a larger swath of the American public to stand up for itself. Were the rest of America like Vermont and Maine - where even imprisoned felons retain the right to vote - how much sooner would sentencing reforms and "ban the box" measures take effect?

Idaho and Washington are among 18 states that strip convicts of the vote until they complete probation and parole. That's not as extreme as Mississippi and Nevada - where the franchise is

withheld for several years after the convict completes his probation and parole. But it's much more severe than Montana, Oregon and Utah, where an individual's rights of citizenship are restored the minute he is freed.

Nobody is talking Mulligans here. The punishment should fit the crime - but no more. - M.T.