

Brimming prisons . . .

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A recent report by the Bureau of Justice Statistics offers strong support for financial restitution as one alternative. The report contends, "most victimizations lead to losses that seem readily manageable" through restitution programs.

The only exception cited by the report - "Restitution of Victims of Personal and Household Crimes" - is auto theft, where one-third of the losses exceeded \$1,000. And even so, only 32 percent of auto thefts resulted in no recovery of the loss.

The strongest argument against restitution as an alternative to prison is that it makes crime an even bet; at worst a thief will have to give back what he stole. Nevertheless, in purely pragmatic terms, it seems to work.

Since the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration started developing and testing restitution programs in 1976, mostly for juvenile offenders, 87 percent of the eligible juveniles successfully completed their restitution agreements, and less than 15 percent were rearrested for new offenses. Thus it appears that restitution is not only more practical than new prison construction but also more effective in terms of crime reduction.

And not just for juveniles. A 1978 survey of 40 adult restitution programs also showed encouraging results.

Renshaw warns that a major shift to restitution would be followed by an apparent increase in criminal activity. This is so, he said, because the possibility of restitution would probably increase the reporting of crimes that now go unreported.

"Law-enforcement officials as well as victims may be influenced to take actions in cases previously considered

trivial where the potential benefit is not direct and the sanction (restitution) is more certain," he said.

Probably the biggest obstacle to restitution and other non-prison alternatives is the notion that anything short of imprisonment amounts to softness on crime. That may change as more of us come to understand the degree to which imprisonment increases criminality.

Besides, wouldn't most victims of nonviolent offenses get more satisfaction from restitution than from learning that the criminal has been packed off to prison?

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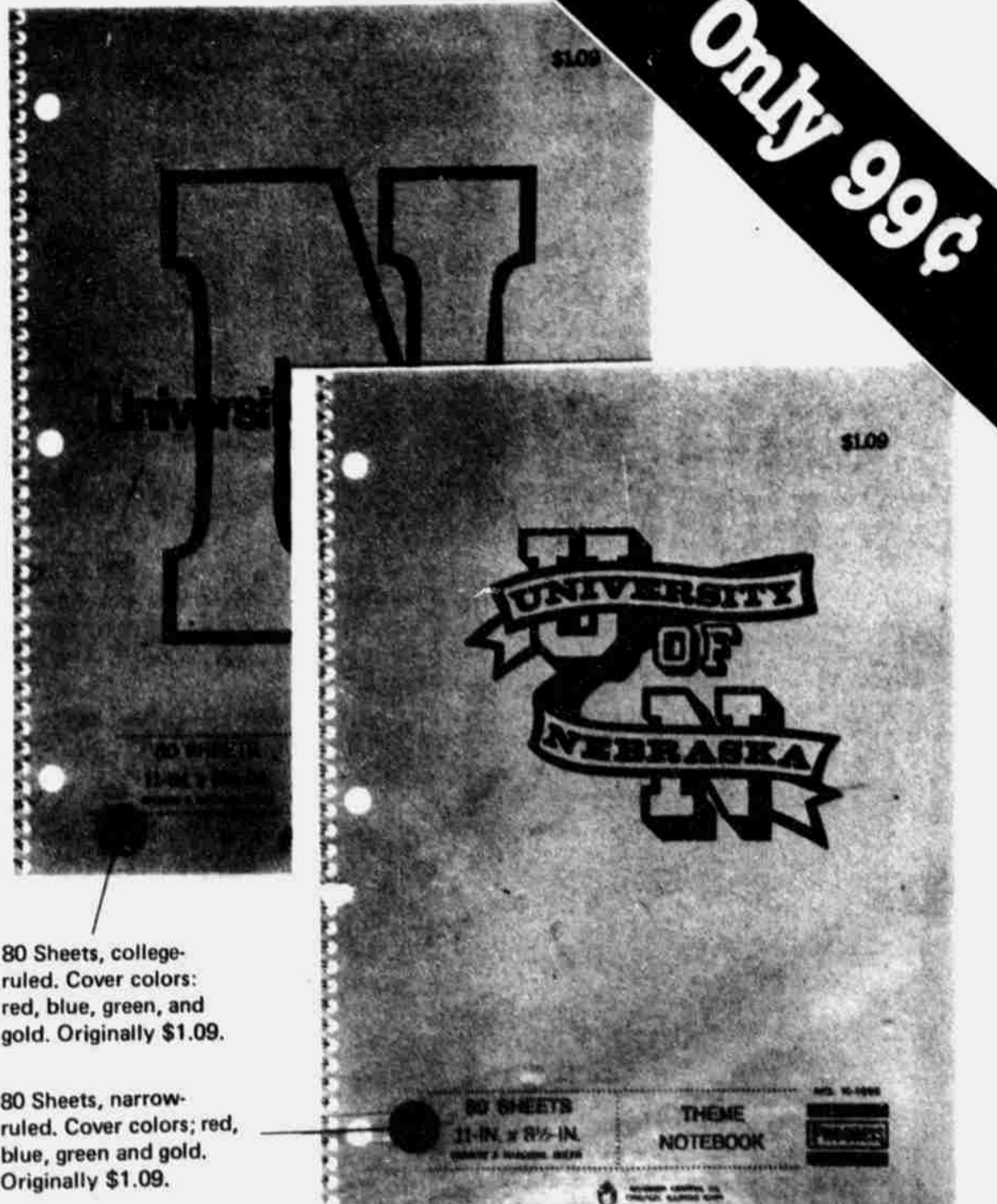
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