

Facilitating the Re-Entry of Former Prisoners

“America is the land of second chance, and when the gates of prison open, the path ahead should lead to a better life.”

George W. Bush, State of the Union Address, 2004

The Data

- **The magnitude of incarceration and reentry.** Almost 1.5 million people are in state and federal prisons. Each day about 1,600 leave prison and return to the community. This represents over 600,000 returnees annually. (J. Travis et.al., *From Prison to Home*, Urban Institute 2001)
- **The community implications of reentry.** A large majority of formerly incarcerated people return to significantly distressed and working class communities in and around the central cities of metropolitan areas. (J.P. Lynch & W. J. Sabol, *Prisoner Reentry in Perspective*, Urban Institute, 2001)
- **The likelihood of recidivism.** Given the range of issues that confront formerly incarcerated individuals (see below) and the lack of services and supports to address them, recidivism is projected to be almost 66% within three years of release. (J. Travis et.al. , above)

The Issues

- **Lack of programs in prison to foster successful reentry.** People in prison are disproportionately low-income and have limited education and work experience. Only 35% received the educational programming they need and only 27% the vocational programming to improve their post-release prospects. (S. Lawrence et.al., *The Practice and Promise of Prison Programming*, Urban Institute, 2002) About 75% of returning individuals have a history of substance abuse, but less than 1/3 received treatment in prison. (J. Travis et.al., above)
- **Challenges of family reunification.** Formerly incarcerated individuals often return to families that are struggling with poverty and related crises, as well as the range of emotions that a loved one’s imprisonment produces. While constructive family ties reduce recidivism and homelessness, few supports are available for families during the reunification transition. (J. Travis & M. Waul, *Prisoners Once Removed*, Urban Institute Press, 2003)
- **Insufficient community-based supports and services.** Other challenges upon return include the need for housing, substance abuse treatment, and work. Limited data suggest that in major urban areas 30-50% of parolees may be homeless, few receive the substance abuse treatment they need, and perhaps 1/5 find full-time jobs. (J. Travis et.al., above)
- **Policy roadblocks.** Many state and federal laws pose barriers to successful reentry, the ability to support a family , and responsible citizenship by putting jobs off-limits to returnees, banning them from public benefits and public housing, and denying them the right to vote after serving their time. (Legal Action Center, *After Prison: Roadblocks to Reentry*, 2004)
- **Lifelong wage penalty.** The majority of state inmates held a low-wage job prior to incarceration. But the economic cost of incarceration for men is a loss of \$6000-\$7000 annually compared to their counterparts who have never been in prison. (M. Joseph, *The Economic Consequences of a Criminal Background*, 2002)

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Options for Philanthropy

- **Producing local area data for Issue Identification, Intervention, and evaluation.** Each community needs to know what neighborhoods will receive the most formerly incarcerated persons, what their needs are, what resources exist to assist them, what else needs to be done, and what works. The Urban Institute's *Re-Entry Mapping Network* (see below) offers a model for data collection and analysis. The re-entry field as a whole would benefit from good evaluations of program interventions in order to invest its resources most effectively.
- **Supporting successful practice and replication of promising interventions.** Organizations like the Fifth Avenue Committee (www.fifthave.org) address a range of issues faced by returning community members and utilize the latter's first-hand understanding of what's needed and what can work to shape the programs. Three factors most critical to re-entry success are steady employment, substance abuse treatment, and family connections. The Urban Institute's *Outside the Walls* (see below) describes a wide range of programs focused on successful re-entry.
- **Underwriting policy advocacy and system reform.** In addition to the need for barriers to successful re-entry to be removed (see Legal Action Center resource below), research indicates that successful re-entry must begin inside prison. In-prison programming like vocational training and substance abuse treatment have been shown to be cost-effective by reducing recidivism. (J. Travis et.al., *From Prison to Home*, 2001)

Key Resources

- **Urban Institute, Justice Policy Center.** Publications on re-entry issues and challenges based on the latest research and data, including *Outside the Walls: A National Snapshot of Community-Based Prisoner Re-entry Programs* and the *Re-Entry Mapping Network*. (www.urban.org/content/PolicyCenters/Justice/Projects/PrisonerReentry/Publications/pubs.htm)
- **Legal Action Center.** *After Prison: Roadblocks to Re-Entry* for policy barriers that prevent formerly incarcerated persons from working toward self-sufficiency. (www.lac.org/roadblocks.html)
- **Re-Entry National Media Outreach Campaign.** Media resources to generate solutions-oriented community conversations about a range of family and community issues. (www.reentrymediaoutreach.org)



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