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INSIGHTS

Offender Preparation & Education Network, Inc.

Reconceptualizing Reentry Where Do We Go From Here?

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The J. McDonald Williams Institute

Our nation continues to turn a blind eye to the reality that nearly 97 percent of the estimated 2.3 million incarcerated persons (which represents prison populations only) will eventually be released back into society and back into our communities.ⁱⁱⁱ According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, in 2006 over 7.2 million people were on probation, in jail, in prison, or on parole by the year's end.ⁱⁱⁱ For far too long, reentry has been classified as being outside the scope of corrections, or has been considered an activity that occurs just prior to or directly following release. The definition of reentry in academic circles, especially criminology and sociology, has likewise remained somewhat static; reentry programs were implemented just prior to or at the point of release, and the success or failure of these programs was measured by recidivism rates or, more simply, the "absence of failure."

During the 1960s and early 1970s, the justice system adopted rehabilitative models of punishment in an effort to reduce recidi-

vism, treat offenders, create safer communities, and eventually decrease the number of individuals incarcerated. These programs, fraught with good intentions, boasted very little research on which to base their treatment methods. As a result, the pendulum quickly swung and the corrections industry quickly changed its views on rehabilitative programs; a study by Martinson in 1974 suggested that the rehabilitative efforts embraced by treatment programs were having no effect on recidivism rates.^{iv} This oft-cited, pivotal piece of academic scholarship signaled the beginning of a "nothing works" mentality which

took hold during the 1980s and 1990s; the incapacitation model of corrections was back. During this time, funding for almost every rehabilitation-oriented program was cut, and we witnessed one of the most dramatic booms in incarceration in modern history. While the somewhat hopeless report with its pessimistic tone challenged many social scientists to refute Martinson's findings, it ultimately led us to where we are today: If "something works," now is the time to prove it.

After Martinson's analysis, social scientists turned their focus toward quantifying "what works" and started asking new questions about how to define reentry and likewise how to define reentry program success. This required both practitioners and academics to ask the same questions, but from a different perspective: How should reentry be implemented? What does reentry provide? How can reentry adapt to individual needs? How should we measure success?

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Today, there remains a need to reconceptualize what is meant by "reentry" on a national level, what is expected

during reentry, and whether those expectations are realistic and applicable given the variety of people touched by incarceration. If reentry

(continued on page 2)

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programs are truly intended to decrease crime rates, decrease individual recidivism rates, protect communities, and ideally create functional, engaged citizens, how should they be implemented? Reports indicate that, if incarceration rates remain unchanged, 1 in every 15 persons in the country will serve time in prison during his or her lifetime.^v There exists now a moral imperative to take a closer look at how the reported failure of rehabilitative programs in the past could lead to something more dynamic and comprehensive in the future.

The truth is that over 600,000 individuals across the country will be released from prison each year.^{vi} The formerly incarcerated are expected to lead productive lives as law-abiding citizens after release. Is this a reasonable expectation given our current approach to reentry? Without an analysis of who these individuals are and what factors contributed to their criminal activity, is this expectation too high? Current re-offense data indicates the answer to this question is an emphatic “Yes!” The most recent studies of national recidivism indicate that 67.5 percent of all incarcerated persons will be rearrested within three years after release and over half of those will return to prison.^{vii}

The good news is that there is a shift towards a more comprehensive understanding of how to implement reentry and what success looks like. The National Institute of Justice acknowledges that a primary way for reentry to be successful is to institutionalize cross-agency and community teamwork. In other words, for reentry to be successful, courts, corrections officials, and supervisory personnel must possess a more comprehensive understanding of each individual released and of the resources and opportunities available at the community level. We can no longer turn a blind eye to the formerly incarcerated people who are released without housing or job training, or who have health conditions that go untreated. These people are returning to our communities, and without the proper tools and the opportunity to live productive lives, the rates of individual recidivism and community victimization will only increase.

At the national level, ideas about reentry are starting to change; however, due to budgetary constraints there is an over-reliance on community or faith-based groups to cover the social and financial burden created by the formerly incarcerated. Unfortunately, little research has examined the effectiveness of these faith-based programs, which rely on community volunteers to interact with prisoners and assess their needs. The National

Institute of Justice acknowledges the vulnerabilities of a nation relying on lay volunteers to lead successful reentry initiatives, but they hide behind that lack of expertise by stating, “Faith-based groups can provide assistance that reflects the values of the community where the offender will live upon release. Because they are

part of the community, faith-based volunteers may offer invaluable knowledge and assistance to offenders who are trying to manage transportation, housing, employment assistance, and health issues.” I would like to emphasize the term “may.” In other words, we do not know if these ex-offenders are getting the tools they need. Maybe they are; maybe they aren’t. It appears that, nationally, we have learned nothing from our mistakes.

The federal government will be unable to solve this problem in its current condition, so it is up to states, communities, and even individual correctional systems to find a solution. Two prime examples of alternative perspectives and expectations of reentry at both the state and community levels include The Center for Community Alternatives in New York State and the Washington State Department of Corrections. Both organizations believe that redefining reentry is at the center of creating effective rehabilitation programs.

Part of this reconceptualization includes:

- Acceptance of the idea that reentry begins at point of intake, not release. Providing offenders with more exposure to treatment programs increases effectiveness (this is supported by research).
- Development of personal assessments and program assignment based on individuals’ specific goals or deficits. A cognitive behavioral approach is supported by research.
- Shifting from reliance solely on individual recidivism as the measurement of success to a broad social view, including attachments to social institutions. Is this person employed? Is the ex-offender receiving treatment for substance abuse problems and staying sober? Is he or she actively involved in his or her community or church? Can this individual maintain a residence?

As Petersilia (2004) emphasizes, if we use only recidivism rates as a measurement of “what works,” we miss out on the more powerful impacts of reentry programs—the powerful social, personal, & family impacts that have yet to be measured.^{viii}

It is time for states and municipalities to accept and support a large-scale shift in thinking about reentry and apply these new

perspectives to their residents, programs, and offenders. It is obvious that release with no preparation, follow up supervision, or support is the perfect recipe for re-offending. We should be reminded that we have all entered

into a social contract, insofar as we have supported and trusted our current justice models to exact justice. For centuries we have trusted in the courts, judges, and juries to represent communities’ interests. Incarceration is a method of punishment which allows us to believe that offenders’ debts to society have been paid after they serve their sentences. If we as a society still support this justice

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model, it is time we support those being released by ensuring they are provided equal opportunity to live productive and successful lives in our communities. In no other arena of social life have we accepted the absence of failure as evidence of success. Perhaps it is time to redefine what constitutes a successful justice system, in addition to raising our criteria for what constitutes successful reentry.

¹Additional information and sources for 97 percent rate are provided at: Council of State Governments. (2005, Jan). "Report of the Re-entry Policy Council: Charting the Safe and Successful Return of Prisoners to the Community." Retrieved March 13, 2008 from <http://www.reentrypolicy.org/report/download>

²Additional information regarding estimated number of inmates in prisons across the nation provided at: <https://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/crimoff.htm#data>

³<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/correct.htm>

⁴Martinson, R. (1974). "What Works? Questions and Answers about Prison Reform." Public Interest, 35, 22-35.

⁵U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics. (nd). "Criminal Offenders Statistics." Retrieved March 13, 2008, from <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/crimoff.htm#recidivism>

⁶Additional information and source cited for the "over 600,000 prison inmates are released annually" statistic found at <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/topics/corrections/reentry/research-findings.htm#bjsp>

⁷Additional information and source for the number of formally incarcerated who are rearrested and imprisoned found at <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/reentry/recidivism.htm>

⁸Petersilia, J. (2003). When Prisoners Come Home: Parole and Prisoner Reentry. Oxford University Press.

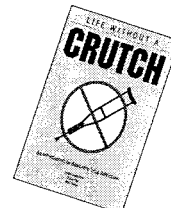
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The J. McDonald Williams Institute was established by the Foundation for Community Empowerment in 2005. The Institute adopts a holistic approach to understanding and examining the complex issues faced by the residents of distressed urban communities. Our atypical research strategy is centered around the concept of quality of life. We utilize the interdisciplinary perspectives of six focal areas—Education, Crime and Safety, Health, Housing, Social Capital, and Economic Development—to underpin our research initiatives. Yet we also recognize that the many strands woven into the fabric of community do not exist independently, and so we must study them as they are—linked to one another in ways we do not fully appreciate. Because quality of life is multidimensional, we know that the solutions that will improve it must also be multidimensional. The Institute not only seeks to better understand the mechanisms by which indicators of quality of life interact with each other, but also to apply that understanding to generate lasting revitalization—across all dimensions of quality of life—in distressed urban neighborhoods. For more information, see www.thewilliamsinstitute.org.



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