

Prisoner Reentry Seen Through a Community Lens

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Luncheon Address at the Neighborhood Reinvestment
Corporation Training Institute



Good afternoon. Thank you, Ellen Lazar, for the kind introduction and your friendship over the years:

I am honored that you have invited me to be with you today and I thank you for the opportunity to share some thoughts about the issue of prisoner reentry, as seen through a community lens.

I am particularly excited to see the interest in this issue coming from organizations like the Neighborhood Reinvestment Corporation that are focussed on the important work of community building. The basic point I hope to make this afternoon is that our nation's punishment policies—in short, the fact that we have increased fourfold the rate of removal, imprisonment, and reentry over the past generation—has significantly weakened the capacity of communities to do the work that communities should do: raise children, provide a healthy environment for families, provide jobs for young and old, and sustain a vibrant civic life. For this reason, the issue of prisoner reentry is an issue that falls squarely within the agenda of community builders.

Many people write about, and agitate about, our national punishment policies. I am fortunate to be leading a team at the Urban Institute that is doing what we do best—conducting research, promoting new knowledge, and sharing our findings with a broad audience.¹ But I am convinced that the energy and insistence needed to bring about more effective responses to crime will only come from the community level. So, for these reasons, I am particularly honored that you invited me to speak with you today.

Let's back up and put this issue in its proper perspective.

This year, 600,000 individuals will leave the prisons of our state and federal governments and return home. That is 1,600 a day. That is four times the number of people who made similar journeys from prison to home a short twenty years ago. That is more people than live here in the District of Columbia.

We should not be surprised by this fact. After all, over the past generation, we have systematically, intentionally, increased the per capita rate of imprisonment in this country fourfold. And we know that, with rare exceptions, everyone who goes to prison returns home eventually.

Yet we are surprised. As I speak about this issue around the country, I see expressions of shock, disbelief or denial. Can it really be? Six hundred thousand people is a lot of people.

¹ For an overview of the research on prisoner reentry, see *From Prison to Home: The Dimensions and Consequences of Prisoner Reentry*, by Jeremy Travis, Amy L. Solomon, Michelle Waul, The Urban Institute, June 2001.



Our surprise speaks volumes about us. Our shock reveals something significant about our national values. We somehow think that by putting people in prison, we have put them, their problems, and, yes, their potential, out of sight, beyond the reach of our concern. We are reminded that, in an earlier era, the British sent their criminals to America, or to Australia. And in colonial times, we banished our criminals and exiled them to begin a new life in a new town where they could leave their past behind. But in these modern times, when we send people to prison, they all come back, and they come back home.

The 600,000 who return from prison this year are in many ways quite like the 150,000 who returned twenty years ago: poorly educated, typically with histories of substance abuse, mostly African American or Latino, mostly men, and often with histories of violence. They struggle to adjust from the regimented, artificial life in prison, to the chaotic, often disorienting life in their old neighborhoods.

Yet the phenomenon of prisoner reentry is fundamentally different today. These prisoners have been incarcerated for longer periods of time. Fewer of them have participated in education, job training or drug treatment programs as corrections agencies have scrambled to pay for new prisons and more corrections officers. The probation and parole agencies that have traditionally been responsible for assisting them in their transition from detention to freedom have suffered budget reductions, causing caseloads to rise. These agencies have also experienced a crisis of identity, as they struggle to simultaneously provide surveillance and services.

The movement of 600,000 people from prison to home has another important distinction today. The fourfold increase in the rates of incarceration is not evenly distributed across America's communities—it is concentrated in our poorest communities, particularly poor communities of color. So the aggressive cycle of arrest, removal, incarceration and reentry is highly concentrated in communities that are already facing the enormous challenges of poverty, crime, disinvestment and inadequate social services. Yet these are the communities we are asking to take on the difficult task of reintegrating record numbers of returning prisoners.

We can express these new facts with some simple statistics, drawn from a study conducted in New York City²:

- In certain neighborhoods in Brooklyn, New York, one out of eight parenting-age males is admitted to jail or prison in a single year.
- Eleven percent of the city blocks in Brooklyn account for twenty percent of the population, yet are home to fifty percent of the parolees.

² Analysis by Eric Cadora and Charles Swartz for the Community Justice Project at the Center for Alternative Sentencing and Employment Services (CASES), 1999. For more information see <http://www.communityjusticeproject.org/>.

- When one calculates the cost of incarcerating these individuals, we realize the taxpayers of New York State spend up to \$3 million a year to house and feed the young men on a single block, but the housing we pay for is a prison or a jail.

Let's look at another city, Cleveland Ohio. In that city, according to a study by Jim Lynch and Bill Sabol³:

- Three percent of the county's block groups accounted for about twenty percent of the state's prisoners.
- Looking at the block groups with high rates of people incarcerated, on any given day 1.5% of the population was in prison.
- For black men between the ages of 18 and 29, the one-day incarceration rate was between eight and fifteen percent.
- Looking at the 48 block groups in Cleveland with high rates of incarceration, between 350 and 700 offenders will return home from prison to those blocks each year.

So, we need to ask some important questions: What is the impact of these concentrations of removal, incarceration and return in a small number of communities? What does it mean for large numbers of young men (for they are mostly men, even accounting for the recent increase in women prisoners) to be taken out of these communities, sent to prison for almost three years on average, and then released back into the community? We typically and instinctively focus on the positive side of that analysis—recognizing that these individuals often pose a danger to the community, are often involved in violence within the family, and frequently are engaged in risky behaviors such as drug use, gang activities and drug dealing. So, arguably, the community gains from their removal. Yet, there is another side to the equation.

Some researchers are now testing the hypothesis that the level of incarceration is so high that we have weakened the capacity of communities to control crime. This may not make sense at first blush, but think about it. If we believe that strong families, financially viable communities, and social cohesion—what some are now calling “collective efficacy”, or the ability of the collective to be efficacious—contribute to lower crime rates, then is it possible that a weakening of community capacity through a policy of mass incarceration will actually result in higher crime rates? Two researchers at the City University of New York, Dina Rose and Todd Clear, are testing this proposition and have found, in one study, that crime rates went up after a certain tipping point was reached. After a certain percentage of the population had been put into prison, the result was not less crime, but more crime as the community infrastructure was weakened. This is very important research—research that we hope to replicate—that might document some unexpected consequences of our national experiment in imprisonment.

I would like to focus on another aspect of the impact of our incarceration policies. There are many consequences that flow from those policies and they concentrate in poor communities. Take the simple fact that there are 1.5 million minor children with a parent in prison. Who cares for these children? What is the impact on foster care, kinship care,

³ See J.P. Lynch and W.J. Sabol. Forthcoming. “Prisoner Reentry in Perspective.” Urban Institute *Crime Policy Report*. Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute Press.

school programs? Take the fact that new federal laws authorize housing authorities and Section 8 providers to evict individuals with certain criminal convictions. What impact does this policy have on access to housing, homelessness, and family life in public housing? Or consider the research finding that imprisonment has the effect of decreasing the lifetime earnings of former prisoners. As a higher percentage of men have prison experiences, particularly African American and Latino men living in inner cities, what is the net effect of our imprisonment policies on the financial health of those communities? We are just beginning to understand these dynamics of our criminal justice policies, but we need to put our understanding into a social capital framework so that we view these policies through a community lens.

Finally, we should recognize that the new phenomenon of imprisonment and reentry also has profound consequences for our democracy and our pursuit of racial justice.

- The rate of imprisonment (for a year or more) in the United States is now 476 persons per 100,000. This rate varies dramatically by race. In 1999, one in every 29 African-American males was sentenced to at least a year's confinement, compared with one in every 75 Hispanic males, and one in every 240 white males.
- In more than a dozen states, a convicted felon loses the right to vote—for life. Thirty-two states prohibit offenders on probation or parole from voting. As a result, nearly 4 million Americans, one in fifty adults, is barred from voting. Of these, 1.4 million are African American, accounting for 13 percent of the adult black male population. In states with lifetime bans, the consequences for democratic participation are deeply disturbing. One in four—*one in four*—African American men have lost the right to vote for life in Alabama, Florida, Iowa, Mississippi, New Mexico, Virginia and Wyoming.

My colleagues and I at the Urban Institute have written a monograph describing the dimensions and consequences of prisoner reentry, *From Prison to Home: The Dimensions and Consequences of Prisoner Reentry*, and I am pleased to see that copies have been provided at the conference. We focus on the health issues: the high rates of HIV and AIDS, of tuberculosis, hepatitis and mental illness. We document the impact of incarceration on children, beginning with the fact that 1.5 million minor children have a parent in prison, a 50 percent increase since 1990. We write about the high rates of recidivism—the troubling fact that nearly two thirds of those released from prison will be rearrested in three years, forty percent sent back to prison. We lay out the cost of imprisonment—now about \$44 billion a year, up from \$9 billion in 1982. We lay out the facts and they are grim.

Yet I am struck by the optimism we encounter when we talk about prisoner reentry with colleagues and communities around the country.

Why is this so? Perhaps it is because crime rates are at the lowest level in a generation, allowing a more open and balanced conversation about crime and justice policy. Perhaps it is because the great prison expansion is virtually over, allowing us to focus on the prisoners returning home. Perhaps it is because communities around the country have been energized by their successes in reducing crime rates, by their productive

partnerships with the police, and have turned their attention to the consequences of imprisonment. Perhaps our national conscience has been awakened and we realize we need to rethink our whole approach to punishment.

I cannot read these particular tea leaves. I only know that practitioners, community leaders and other people of good will are asking new questions; questions that were not in the crime and justice conversation a few years ago. I want to bring some of those voices into this conference today so you can take them to heart.

- In Boston, an unusual coalition of police and probation officers, clergy, prosecutors, street workers, and employers are working with young people on probation and coming out of jail to reduce the violence and provide guidance and tangible employment opportunities.
- In Baltimore, a coalition of community leaders, police officers, former prisoners and parole agents, organized by the Enterprise Foundation, has created a welcoming committee to go into the Maryland prisons to talk with every single prisoner scheduled to return to one of the high concentration neighborhoods involved in their reentry pilot project. They talk about health care, housing needs, family reunification, religious connections, support systems, and expectations for law-abiding behavior. They build bridges between the world inside prison and the one on the other side of the prison wall. At one of the meetings last week, a prisoner stood up and said he had been discharged from prison three times before, but until now, no one had welcomed him home.
- In Spokane Washington, a coalition of community activists, led by a victim's advocate, has organized a support network for returning prisoners, engaging community residents in the difficult task of prisoner reintegration. They have been particularly successful in managing the unique issues posed by returning sex offenders.
- In Nevada, the Republican Governor has sponsored legislation allowing prisoners with a history of drug abuse to be released from prison early, on the condition they participate in drug treatment supervised by a new reentry court.
- Last year, the Congress approved a new appropriation of approximately \$100 million, proposed by President Clinton, to create 25 reentry partnerships in communities around the country. At the bidders conference two months ago in St. Louis, over 700 individuals showed up, representing 44 states.

So, there are reasons to be optimistic. But there are many miles to go. In my fondest hopes, the new interest in the issue of prisoner reentry will provide a safe environment for tackling even tougher questions, such as:

- “Why have we come to rely on imprisonment so heavily?”
- “How can we reduce crime without invoking the enforcement powers of the state?”
- “Can we have criminal justice policies that are not tinged with racism?”
- “How can we resolve conflicts without bringing them through the criminal justice system?”
- “How can we give the victims of crime a sense that they have been treated justly and fairly and that we care as much about helping them rebuild their lives as we care about the reintegration of offenders?”

- “How can we draw upon the power of community to support prosocial behavior, discourage and condemn antisocial behavior, and do the hard work of reconciliation wherever possible?”

In a very real sense, the quality of justice in our country depends on our ability to find answers to those questions.

Thirty years ago, a famous presidential commission published a report with the wonderful title, “The Challenge of Crime in a Free Society.” Among other things, this report documented the workings of the criminal justice system—with police at the front end of an assembly line making arrests; prosecutors, defense lawyers and judges in the middle moving cases toward disposition; and corrections agencies at the back end managing the prison, parole and probation systems. We have learned, I hope, that we cannot rely on this machinery to produce a sense of justice. Justice cannot be found in the workings of these government agencies. Justice requires the active engagement of the people affected by a conflict we call a crime: the parties to the conflict, often their families, others who have a stake in the dispute, and those who can help achieve positive outcomes. This notion of justice envisions a big table—with many people at the table actively involved in solving problems and addressing tough issues—not an assembly line moving cases.

It is an exciting time to be thinking about these issues, because communities around the country are demanding a seat at that table, reshaping our notions of how the criminal justice system should do its work—and many practitioners are responding positively. The community policing movement is the best known example. But we are also witnessing prosecutors who are setting up neighborhood and community prosecution initiatives. Community courts have sprung up in over twenty cities around the country. Community based public defender systems are being created. The final step in this community justice movement will be the engagement of communities in the really tough issue of punishment. And the first step along the path will be to break down the prison walls (figuratively, of course): for community groups to demand to be engaged with corrections officials on the issue of prisoner reentry. You have a right to know who is coming back to your community; when they are coming back; how they are prepared for their inevitable return; how they will be released; who is responsible for them; and whether they have the essentials of life, such as housing, identification papers, medications. You have the authority to change the conversation. You can ask those tough questions and help the country in our continuing search for justice. And I hope you do just that, and trust you will, because you are engaged in the important work of community building and neighborhood reinvestment.

Thank you again for the invitation to join you this afternoon.