Communities and Prisons

Public Engagement: Toward the Betterment of Communities and Individuals

Prepared by the National Coalition of Community-Based Correctional and Community Re-Entry Service Organizations (NC4RSO)

December, 2010

Introduction

There's a social barometer and correctional issue that the general public needs to be more aware of - that the U.S. incarcerates a higher percentage of its population, per capita, than any other country on earth – including countries such as China, Russia, and South Africa. The U.S. incarcerates 3.5 times as many of its residents than Canada, our immediate neighbor to the north.

The U.S. incarcerates 756 persons per 100,000 persons (population) (source: King's College, 2009: http://www.kcl.ac.uk/news/news_details.php?news_id=993&year=2009).   At the same time, 62.5% of countries have rates below 150 persons per 100,000   (source: World Prison Population List, 2003: http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs2/r188.pdf). To put it another way, "The US has less than 5% of the world's population, but over 23% of the worlds incarcerated people" (source: November, 2006 Fact Sheet from the National Council on Crime and Delinquency).

There's something wrong when the leading country of the free world has the lowest percentage of free citizens on the planet. Something needs to be done about this.

What can be said about this situation that Fordham University's Dr. James Wilson calls "the U.S. social experiment in mass incarceration?" As articulated by Dr. Wilson, "whenever an intervention is contemplated and implemented, there is always an implicit assumption that 'good' is going to come of it (source: "Habilitation or Harm: Project Greenlight and the Potential Consequences of Correctional Programming.")." Is there any good coming from our social experiment in mass incarceration?

There's plenty of debate about why we incarcerate so many of our people. Is it higher crime rates? A stricter attitude toward crime and punishment? A higher expectation of personal responsibility rather than a collective social conscience – including an expectation that individuals are solely responsible for avoiding errant behavior? The result of social problems that communities and/or individuals fail to address, causing affected individuals to act out in unsafe and/or socially inappropriate ways? A consequence of closing psychiatric facilities – causing psychiatric patients to released from taxpayer-funded mental health facilities, only to commit crimes that land them in taxpayer-funded jails and prisons? Failed social safety nets? Any number of arguments exist pointing to one or more of these issues as root causes of our high incarceration levels.

Whatever the cause of our high incarceration rates, ***our*** tax dollars are paying for our jails and prisons. ***Our*** communities are disrupted by the consequences of incarceration - families of the incarcerated are disrupted, individuals released from jail often re-enter our communities ill-prepared to be engaged and productive members of society, human productivity is lost, tax dollars spent on incarceration are diverted from productive public expenditures such as education and community services.

We need to claim our communities and engage in making them strong. Our communities are not just* for *us – they are also* of *and* by *us. All of us. The "we" in this equation (i.e., the solution to incarceration) must collectively include members of the general public, persons who are currently incarcerated, formerly-incarcerated persons, people who are at-risk of coming into conflict with the law, and our community organizations. In addition to having our correctional facilities provide programming by paid professionals (who provide a valid and relevant function), more members of our communities need to be involved in community-based services delivered in correctional facilities – as well as involved in community re-entry programming and proactive involvement in supporting incarceration avoidance for individuals at risk of coming into conflict with the law.

Our current policy of mass incarceration diverts tax dollars away from proactive services – such as education – that positively benefit our communities. While incarceration is sometimes necessary for public safety

("when informal relationships and sanctions prove insufficient to establish and maintain a desired social order" source: Wikipedia http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crime), incarceration as a singular isolating activity is not a strengthening agent for the community. Rather, incarceration as a specific activity within a broader "corrective" context needs to actively include the community's engagement to be an effective tool within and our communities. While there is some community engagement involving our correctional facilities, this engagement typically operates at low levels. When we consider that "at least 95% of all state prisoners will be released from prison at some point" (source: http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/reentry/reentry.cfm), it's in the best interest of our communities for us to be engaged in having incarcerated individuals return to the community better than when they left. Individuals do not return to other communities – they return to our communities. Not just to our cities – but sometimes to *our* neighborhoods. ***This makes incarceration and release part of your community.*** We want incarceration to be an opportunity for positive change for incarcerated individuals; there is an interactive role for us – as members of the community – to make incarceration an agent for positive change.

Why argue that there's a role for the community in the corrections context?

There are plenty of "needs" in our communities – schools, seniors, abandoned pets, hospitals, etc. Why make an argument for engaging the public in corrections? Aren't other causes more worthwhile and profitable? Well, consider that crime reduces quality of life in our communities (crime generates damage, lost property, and fear). On another point, criminal activity is a visible symptom of what happens when the overall health of community and individuals declines. Just as individuals must attend to both the positive aspects of personal health (exercise, diet, etc.) and to the correction of health problems (i.e., seek treatment for illness), so must we as communities engage in the correction of community weakness (i.e., engage in corrections) as well as the prevention of weakness (schools, etc.) in order for our communities to be healthy and strong. Discussion is provided later about the inaccuracy of thinking that prisons are just a place to place inmates because "incarcerated people deserve what they get. Leave them to learn from their mistakes by doing time."

Simply incarcerating people as a punishment for crime isn't a singularly complete solution that deterring crime. While incarceration stops the physical act of incurring current and potentially further harm to individuals and/or communities (theft, assault, etc.) and provides individuals with an opportunity to reflect on the need for change, incarceration also segregates individuals from social networks that encourage positive behavior. As individuals become increasingly isolated from positive social contexts, they become increasingly prone to increased criminalization and anti-social feelings and behavior. While incarcerated individuals are often already disengaged from positive social contexts prior to incarceration, incarceration further forces such isolation unless the community *brings* community-based programming into institutions via volunteers from the community. Such program deliver provides an *opportunity* for incarcerated individuals to engage with productive community organizations and networks. Volunteers from the community also serve additional critical functions in correctional facilities. Volunteers deliver services without spending tax dollars. Volunteers allow incarcerated individuals to see first hand that society has not entirely thrown them away (a common perception that leads to further feelings of isolation). In addition, the somewhat common concept that institutionalization "should teach people to learn from their mistake (i.e., crime) and therefore not commit future crime" is an idea not always understood or recognized by individuals who find themselves incarcerated; the life skill of understanding cause and effect is something that sometimes need to be taught while individuals are incarcerated. ***To summarize, volunteers provide incarcerated individuals with an opportunity to learn practical and appropriate life skills from members of the community to which they will likely one day return.***

Incarceration:
A tempting way to ignore problems
An opportunity to engage in social change

This paper repeatedly mentions that incarceration is sometimes necessary. Yet incarceration can also be a social mechanism for psychologically shutting away the most challenged or challenging members of society - members of society that we'd rather forget about.

This strategy of forgetting about select segments of society does nothing toward improving our communities. Again, most incarcerated individuals return to the community. It would be preferable to engage in having individuals return to the community better than when they left (strictly leaving this to institution staff "who are paid by our tax dollars to do this" is an incomplete approach). Thoughts on engaging the community within correctional facilities come from varied perspectives. Social activists and social workers call upon us to engage with incarcerated individuals from the perspective of providing social support to those who need it. For those with Christian religious views, there is a religious sentiment that we have a responsibility to engage with the "least of our brethren." "When you visited those in prison, you visited me." "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me (Matthew 25:40)." For people whose political views call for tax reduction and minimal government, the fact of our country supporting 25% of the world's prison population should encourage efforts to reduce prison rates as a mechanism to reduce government – which requires an undertaking of methods of achieving such a goal (such as engaging with incarcerated persons to provide direction toward lifestyles that don't involve crime and lessening our society's dependence on the legal process and institutions as a behavior control mechanism).

There is also the consideration that ignoring the most challenged (or challenging) members of our communities – by shuffling them away to institutions - does not make our communities complete, healed, or even fully provide "justice." We need to *engage* in addressing challenging behavior in our communities – not just depend solely on locking it away. This may sound contrary to those who say that "incarcerated people deserve what they get. Leave them to learn from their mistakes by doing time" [The U.S. Bureau of Justice Assistance states that, "The political dimensions of crime-related public policy generate conflict between advocates of incapacitation and those supporting more preventative and rehabilitative community-based strategies" (source: Bureau of Justice Assistance, "The Future of Jails and Jail Funding Initiatives.")]. Yet, there is a growing movement to engage a process of "restorative justice" in lieu of or along with incarceration – an alternative "corrective" process of engaging offenders with the individuals they've harm to actively take responsibility and to actually "repair" harm done rather than to just sit in a correctional facility (exactly how does sitting in a correctional facility repair harm caused to society?). In addition to restorative justice, incarceration as a sometimes necessary activity can have the effect of encouraging people who have committed detrimental behavior to change their behavior – but only if incarceration is used as an opportunity to teach improved life skills necessary for improving one's behavior (i.e., institutionalization at best, is an opportunity for teaching new life skills). *Life skills programs delivered by paid professionals within institutions can be one necessary component of teaching new skills; additional programming delivered by members of the community have the distinct advantage of being a non-tax-burden skills-teaching approach that connects incarcerated individuals with positive community support networks and provides a learning environment free of the institutionalized and sometimes strained relationships that may exist between incarcerated individuals and paid staff. Remember that the people we incarcerate come back to your community and my community when they get released – often ill-equipped to re-enter the community successfully. The consequences of ill-preparedness affect both these individuals and our community as a whole. Not to mention the human, social, and tax consequences of crime and incarceration. That makes incarceration and release a topic that affects you, me, your family, and your neighbors. We all need to engage in making our communities better, safer, and less inclined to individual conflict with the law.*

Removing people from the community when they are creating and experiencing challenges not only removes them from the community – it also removes them from community safety nets and community-based solutions. Bringing communities and community solutions into institutions provides opportunities for communities to engage in effecting change for and with members of our communities who are in greatest need of community solutions. *Not only change – but changes reflecting local solutions to local problems.* As aptly stated by Chaplain Henk Smidstra of Allouette Correctional Centre for Women in British Columbia (when he was the chaplain at B.C.'s former Burnaby Correctional Centre for Women): "Volunteers humanize jails and prisons. Volunteers bring communities into jails and prisons."

What about a counterargument of expecting incarcerated persons to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps? We Americans value "self-made" persons who succeed by their own merits. Well, that's great when it works. Statistics on recidivism indicate that expecting incarcerated individuals to "pull oneself up" alone isn't the whole answer to making *your* community more free of criminal behavior. Remember, too, that if you are succeeding by any measure you didn't get where you are alone – you had guidance from within the community from people such as parents, teachers, and/or community leaders. In the context of this paper, we need to be talking about "a hand up rather than a hand out." "It takes a village to… (raise a child)" (Hillary Clinton).

Approaches to Engaging in Public Safety and Community Well-Being

As mentioned earlier in the quote from Wikipedia, "When informal relationships and sanctions prove insufficient to establish and maintain a desired social order, a government or a sovereign state may impose more formalized or stricter systems of social control…Authorities employ various mechanisms to regulate (encouraging or discouraging) certain behaviors in general. (source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crime)"

We, as local communities and as a collective society, need to make our community relationships more effective at creating effective social order(s) without high reliance upon incarceration as a solution to social disorder and the consequences thereof (high levels of crime and incarceration being a consequence thereof). There will always be some measure of social disorder (including crime), but targeted community engagement can – and should – be utilized to reduce it. *Incarceration should be used only as a last resort to deal with the worst offenses.*

Creating Effective Social Order(s)
Community engagement is critical to making a society healthy. Just as democracy must inherently be *of* and *by* the people as well as *for* the people; so must a health society be **of** and **by** the people.

In regards to the particulars of community engagement, community well-being, crime, and incarceration, we need to address social challenges that are known to disproportionately increase the likelihood of incarceration. Statistics on crime tell us that we are not doing enough when engage in easy, popular, or mainstream causes that reach the majority of society who successfully avoid conflict with the criminal justice system (although the presence of services within the larger community is certainly necessary and beneficial). In particular, we as a society must also actively engage ourselves in challenges that impact groups such as "young men (and a small percentage of women and older men)" who have or are at risk of having "unsuccessful experiences in their families, schools, military services, and labor force." As noted by James B. Jacobs, these are individuals who are most represented in correctional facilities and who therefore need our attention; they "suffer disproportionately from child abuse, alcohol and drug abuse, poor self-concept, and deficient social skills. They tend to be hostile to others, and especially to authority (source: James B. Jacobs, "Inside Prisons," *Crime File Study Guide* (Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice, 1988)." Add mental illness and, in regards to "unsuccessful experiences in school," uncompleted high school education.

The Specifics of Preventative Social Engagement

Community engagement – *of* and *by* the people - is critical to making a society healthy. Exactly what types of community engagement should *we* become engaged in to create more healthy – and less crime-ridden – communities? More individuals – from mainstream society, the business community, high-risk communities (low-income groups, socially marginalized groups, neighborhoods with high crime rates and low educational attainment, etc.), faith-based groups, social service agencies (in other words, more people from across the spectrum of society) – need to engage directly with at-risk individuals, at-risk groups, and criminally-engaged segments of our society.

Here are a number of ways to become engaged:

Incarceration, Community Well-Being, and Social Engagement

- **Volunteer at existing social service programs that provide services to at-risk and marginalized groups and individuals in the community.   Sample programs and agencies include:**
  A) Crisis centers
  B) Adult literacy programs
  C) Big Brothers/Big Sisters
  D) Battered women shelters
  E) Youth centers in disadvantage neighborhoods
  F) Homeless shelters
  G) Mental health agencies
  H) Skills training programs targeted at disadvantaged groups (small business entrepreneur programs targeted at low-income communities, life-skills programs for disadvantaged persons, etc.)
  I) Community-specific organizations that support the particular needs of local at-risk groups.

  Don't know of an agency in your community that serves at-risk groups? Contact your local United Way, church or fraternal organization, or volunteerism office to ask about ways to get involved with helping at-risk or crime-involved populations.   Talk to a community group to which you belong (fraternity, church group, corporate volunteerism committee, political outreach group, etc.) about setting up an ongoing program to support the types of at-risk or criminally-involved groups listed above.   Or contact us – the ***National Coalition of Community-based Correctional and Community Re-Entry Service Organizations*** – for information about organizations in your community.

  Whatever you commit to, community engagement activities are most meaningful and useful when committing to more than a few hours once or twice a year. For example, make a minimum commitment to volunteer once a week for six months or twice a month for a year. If you have a family (spouse, children, etc.), consider making volunteerism a family activity.

- **Financially contribute to the groups listed above, either directly or through agencies such as the United Way.**

- **Volunteer in correctional facilities.**

  The Specifics of Managing the Consequences of Social Disorder
  More community engagement in addressing the consequences of social disorder (i.e., crime) can go a long way in preventing future criminal activity and changing lives. Yet, some small measure of criminal activity will always occur – no matter how much we succeed in reducing criminal activity and the risk of criminal activity. In addition to preventing social disorder (above), therefore, there needs to be heightened engagement in working with crime-involved individuals. Providing community-based support to these individuals is also critical; it makes successful re-entry into the community more likely for people who serve a sentence of incarceration.

  Here are common ways to get involved in supporting community-based improvement for people who are incarcerated (yes, members of the public volunteer in correctional facilities across the country):
  A) *Academic tutoring.* Provide educational support to offenders who wish to become more employable (some correctional facilities have formal educational programming in place).
  B) *Organized sporting events, hobby classes, cooking classes, etc.* These activities engage inmates in healthy activities.
  C) *One-on-one socialization programs.* Some correctional facilities recognize the need for criminally-engaged individuals to learn to socialize outside of networks of criminally-involved individuals; pairing up individual inmates with a weekly (or monthly) member from the mainstream community can help teach mainstream social skills.
  D) *Self-improvement programs.* Self-help groups exist in many correctional facilities.
  E) *Faith-based programming* (church services, eastern-religion meditation, social programming by faith-based groups, etc.)
  F) *Escorted passes into the community.* Persons who have been incarcerated for extended periods need to prepare for re-entry into the community. Some correctional facilities make case-by-case determinations – based upon inmate needs and security considerations – about allowing inmates to make escorted visits into the community with a screened volunteer escort to prepare for community re-entry. This can include learning bus routes, arranging housing, visiting a half-way house, connecting with needed social service programs, or getting familiar with parole services.

- **Engage in community re-entry programs**
  Persons who serve jail sentences need to re-integrate into community upon release. Levels of support for community re-entry from the Department of Corrections vary regionally – depending upon local priorities and budgets. Most inmates re-enter the community; whether they do so successfully (i.e., avoid returning to crime and engage in mainstream society) depends in part on whether services are available to them for successful community re-entry. A myriad of activities need to occur immediately (or almost immediately) upon release and this process can be overwhelming without support. Consider the following needs of individuals upon release: Offenders need to have a place to live and need to get there upon release. Bus passes or a car need to be obtained to get to jobs, training, probation appointments, and other appointments. Individuals need to find employment and/or apply for job training. Every day tasks such as finding a local grocery store or opening a bank account become necessary. Connecting with positive social and rehabilitative networks needs to occur. Community-based re-entry programs can assist with this – in terms of establishing re-entry support networks and in terms of providing individual offenders with release-date logistics support. Studies show that individuals who have access to life necessities such as housing are more likely to avoid re-incarceration (logistics such as post-incarceration housing are not always arranged by correctional facility pre-release programs).

We Want You

The ***National Coalition of Community-based Correctional and Community Re-Entry Service Organizations*** is a national membership organization for local, regional, and national community-based organizations that deliver community-based programming in correctional facilities and community re-entry services for recently-incarcerated individuals throughout the country. Sample services delivered in correctional facilities include life skills programs, literacy and skills training, and faith-based programming. Activities geared toward successful re-entry into the community range from housing placement, training, job placement, and family reunification to case management.

We're looking for you to get engaged in the services and activities that our member organizations deliver. Contact us for information about getting involved in community-based corrections-related services in your community (or starting a local group in an underserved area).

Want to see improvements in your community? Want to see the lives of people in your community change for the better? Get involved. "Be the change you want to see in the world" (Mahatma Ghandi).

Reach us at:

National Coalition of Community-based Correctional and Community Re-Entry Service Organizations
250 H St. #224
Blaine, WA 98230
(360) 734-1236

Bibliography

Jacobs, James B. (1988). "Inside Prisons," *Crime File Study Guide* (Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice, 1988)

King's College London, School of Law. Prison *Population Rates per 100,000 Population (217 Countries and Select Countries), 2009.* Data collected from country-specific justice, statistical, and census organizations. URL: http://www.kcl.ac.uk/depsta/law/research/icps/worldbrief/wpb_stats.php?area=all&category=wb_poprate

Smidstra, Chaplain Henk. Allouette Correctional Centre for Women in British Columbia and formerly of the Burnaby Correctional Centre for Women.

 "The Future of Jails and Jail Funding Initiatives." Focus Group Papers, 2007 – Las Vegas (May 7 – 8, 2007) and Orlando, Florida (June 4 – 5, 2007). US Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Assistance (Center for Innovative Public Policies). URL: http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/BJA/pdf/Jail_Focus_Group_Papers.pdf

The National Council on Crime and Delinquency (November, 2006). Fact Sheet – US Rates of Incarceration: A Global Perspective (Focus).

Wikipedia entry on crime and law enforcement: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crime .

Wilson, James A. (2007). Habilitation or Harm: Project Greenlight and the Potential Consequences of Correctional Programming. NIJ Journal No. 257, June 2007. National Institute of Justice (The Research, Development, and Evaluation Agency of the U.S. Department of Justice). URL: http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/journals/257/habilitation-or-harm.html

World Prison Population List, 2003: http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs2/r188.pdf

About the National Coalition of Community-Based Correctional and Community-Re-Entry Service Organizations (NC4RSO):

The mission of the National Coalition of Community-Based Correctional and Community-Re-Entry Service Organizations (NC4RSO) is to support existing local, regional, and national corrections-related community-based organizations and to support the growth of additional community-based services around the U.S. NC4RSO, as an umbrella organization for community-based corrections-related organizations, recognizes the need for communities to engage in making communities safe, supporting tangibly corrective paths for current and former offenders, and creating community contexts that reduce the potential for high-risk demographic groups to head toward paths of crime and incarceration. Individual organizations work toward specific aspects of these topics; as a coordinated network, NC4RSO works to increasing the national scope of community-based corrections-related services, advocate for objectives identified as being of common interest for member organizations within the corrections and corrections-related contexts, broaden corrections-related community engagement, and directly or indirectly support the development of topic and/or region-specific corrections-related initiatives.

National Coalition of Community-Based Correctional and Community-Re-Entry Service Organizations (NC4RSO)
250 H St. #224
Blaine, WA 98230
(360) 734-1236
http://www.nc4rso.org

About the Author:

Kim Burkhardt, founder of the *National Coalition of Community-based Correctional and Community Re-Entry Service Organizations (NC4RSO),* has been active in various aspects of community-based correctional programming since 1993. Ms. Burkhardt earned a bachelor's degree from Western Washington University (1994) and an MBA from Regis University (2001). She founded a business-oriented market research consulting firm in 1999 (work conducted by this firm included a national quantitative health care/education study quoted in a bill that made it to committee in the 110th Congress), has taught business at the university level, wrote a market research book that's been used as a university textbook on two continents, and took a paid campaign staffer position in the 2008 presidential race.