

Reducing Mass Incarceration: “Prison and Reentry Nonprofits” are Essential for Long-Term Reduction of Prison Rates

There’s an active political and media discussion underway about reducing mass incarceration.

The U.S. has 5% of the world’s population and 25% of the world’s prison population.

Reducing mass incarceration – given our current rates of national incarceration – would somehow necessitate increasing release rates. That’s easy enough to understand for the uninitiated.

When looking deeper into the topic, there’s also the need to be sure people succeed in staying out of prison after getting released. That’s where the rubber meets the road. Nationally, recidivism rates – the rate at which people return to prison within three years after getting released - is 67.8% (source: National Institute of Justice, 2005: <http://www.nij.gov/topics/corrections/recidivism/pages/welcome.aspx>).

That’s why “prison and reentry nonprofits” are critical.

Succeeding in the community after incarceration involves a myriad of factors. Logistics such as finding housing, getting a bank account and driver’s license, and landing a job (with a criminal record and often with lower-than-average education) are all an immediate – and nerve-wracking - challenge. Navigating today’s world of daily technology is equally daunting after serving time in institutions that allow access to neither cell phones nor internet access – let alone ATMs and remote key fobs for opening a car. Then there’s the matter of social re-integration. Sometimes, for people who have always lived as an outlier from mainstream society, that means integration for the first time. After institutionalization – a place with its’ own policies, routines, and social norms – integrating into mainstream society is no easy task.

Thus, the critical role of community groups delivering prison and post-prison reentry programs.

Community-based prison and reentry programs are as varied as they are publicly unrecognized. They range from arts programs in prisons (the organization “Prison Performing Arts” in Missouri recently led inmate performances of Macbeth) to university courses for incarcerated students (such as University Beyond Bars in Seattle), parenting-child programs for incarcerated mothers (Aid to Inmate Mothers in Alabama), prison ministries (religious programs), and citizen-led local reentry guidance for recently-incarcerated individuals returning to specific communities. *What these programs all share is that they are about people from the community engaging with current and recently incarcerated individuals to make successful reentry more feasible. Civic engagement to address a social need.*

We all know that personal relationships make a difference in people’s lives. Our own lives are fuller as a result of positive relationships. Children in “neonatal ICU” have better outcomes if they are touched and held. People who are – or have been – incarcerated are more likely to succeed when they have positive people in their lives. Even President Obama referenced this need for connections when he visited a prison in Oklahoma in July, 2015.

The National Network of Prison Nonprofits (NC4RSO) published a 2011 study entitled “Straight-Up: Mentoring Current and Recently Incarcerated Individuals.” In a series of interviews with formerly incarcerated individuals, it was found that **100%** of those who stayed out of prison cited the presence of some kind of mentor in their lives. Not 70% or 90%. 100% of people who STAY out of prison after incarceration have someone who has played some kind of mentoring role – whether that be a formal mentor, a prison chaplain, a volunteer, another former inmate...SOMEONE. Download this study on the “Research Center” section of the National Network of Prison Nonprofits’ website (NC4RSO): http://nc4rso.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=73&Itemid=491