

When Prisoners Come Home

by Linda Ostreicher

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Prisoner rehabilitation is a politically unpopular cause; New York State spent only six percent of its corrections budget on it in 2000. However, the other 94 percent of the corrections budget grows harder to justify as governments run out of areas in which to economize. Releasing prisoners is one way to cut costs; to avoid revolving-door re-arrests, some of this savings must go to what are called "transitional services" or "aftercare."

New York City has a particularly large stake in the success of former inmates returning to the community. Of the 26,000 prisoners released from New York State prisons in 2001, two-thirds were from New York City. The average state parolee is 35 years old, has a substance abuse problem, no high school diploma or GED, was inside for three or four years, and will be back in prison within three years.

In addition to the 350-odd former state prisoners returning to the city in an average week, another 108,000 inmates passed through New York City's own jails in 2002, with the average stay lasting about six weeks. Over two-thirds of these were detainees awaiting trial, meaning that they may have never pled guilty or been convicted of a crime. However, in six weeks, an inmate can be evicted from an apartment; have his or her children placed in foster care; and lose Medicaid, food stamps, and public assistance benefits.

Newly released prisoners rarely have jobs lined up, and many are discharged to homeless shelters. Most have no Medicaid or health insurance, a grave disadvantage for those with serious mental illness or HIV infection. Without help from family members or community organizations, ex-inmates have a strong incentive to commit crimes to survive, and an increased chance of ending up in city hospitals and psychiatric wards.

Factors In Successful Rehabilitation

The harsh sentencing laws of the 1980's were inspired, in part, by a belief that rehabilitation did not work, a conclusion drawn from evaluations of efforts in the 1970's. Since then, as the nation's incarceration rate quadrupled, researchers had ample opportunity to try a variety of rehabilitative strategies, some of which showed promise.

In 1998, the Vera Institute of Justice repeatedly interviewed 49 ex-offenders during their first month of freedom, in New York City. From this small, but in-depth, slice of the life of former inmates, Vera found evidence in favor of several principles on which current transitional

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programs are based. " Ex-offenders who received support from family members were more likely to be successful " Most ex-offenders who found jobs during the first month after their release were either helped by family or friends, or were re-hired by a former employer. " Ex-offenders who stayed in homeless shelters were seven times as likely as others to abscond from parole. " The main barrier to enrolling in drug treatment programs was not having a Medicaid card.

Rehabilitation has gained respectability among conservatives in light of the welfare-to-work trend. Supporters of welfare reform believe that job training and placement, combined with supportive social services, can move large numbers of welfare recipients into steady employment. Prisoners and long-term welfare recipients have some of the same barriers to employment: inadequate education and little work experience. This suggests that ex-offenders could also change their lives through a combination of job services and social services. And across the political spectrum, it is agreed that fathers, even ex-prisoners, should be encouraged to do more for their children, at least financially.

Counterproductive Budget Cuts

After decades of growth, the population in New York State prisons began to fall in 2000. During the two years ending December 2001, the number of state prisoners fell by over five percent, with an additional four percent drop expected by the end of 2003. Meanwhile, key rehabilitation services once available to prisoners have been reduced. By 1997, fewer than one in five substance abusers about to be released nationwide had received substance abuse treatment while in prison. From 1997 to 2000, the number of New York State inmates enrolled in employment programs fell from 4,952 to 4,616. And in 1995, the state cut off access to higher education for inmates. As of October 2001, 9,300 state inmates were on waiting lists for vocational programs, and 11,300 were on waiting lists for substance abuse treatment.

"There's general acceptance by nearly everyone that treatment does work," says Bob Brennan of Phoenix House. His agency serves both clients who voluntarily enter substance abuse treatment, and "mandated" clients, who must stay in treatment as a condition of parole. "Research shows that if two people enter treatment, and one is voluntary and the other is mandated by the court, the mandated person is likely to be more successful," a fact which Brennan attributes to the incentive provided by the threat of prison.

Ex-offenders need one to three years of transitional services to successfully re-direct their lives away from crime, according to testimony before the state legislature by Rudy Cypser, Chairman of CURE-NY. He recommended a three-stage model of drug treatment, beginning in prison, continuing in community-based residential treatment, and ending with outpatient aftercare.

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Other required services were life skills and parenting training, anger management, basic education, and job training and placement. According to Ann McLaughlin of the Osborne Association, a major need is "just to have someone they can call if they have a problem, to see how best to deal with it."

Red Tape And Disorder

Bureaucratic rigidity and bungling are a major source of problems for ex-inmates. Somewhere between arrest and release, most prisoners surrender their identification cards and papers, which then disappear. Inmates who had Medicaid or public assistance before their arrest are likely to be disenrolled during incarceration. Without identification documents, they cannot apply for food stamps, Medicaid, public assistance, Social Security payments, and most jobs. Landlords want to see a security deposit and references from an employer and previous landlord before an apartment is rented.

New York State opted out of one of the more damaging provisions of federal welfare reform: a lifetime ban on benefits for most ex-offenders. However, most inmates are on parole after their release, and may be required to find a job, rather than accept public assistance. Finding and keeping a job, or even qualifying for welfare, can conflict with such parole mandates as keeping curfews, avoiding certain neighborhoods or people, meeting with parole officers, and going to substance abuse treatment or 12-step meetings.

Many prisons do not prepare inmates for life after release. The Visiting Committee of the Correctional Association of New York, which inspected 25 state prisons from 1998 through 2001, found some facilities with vacant job slots for transition planners, and others with this role filled by untrained inmates without job-hunting resources. The quality of discharge services varied widely, indicating a lack of systemwide standards and accountability.

Families Fall Apart

Ties with family members are hard to maintain during incarceration. Most state prisoners are held more than 100 miles away from their homes. Visitors must follow confusing and occasionally humiliating rules. Most fathers never see their children during incarceration, and less than half are able to keep in touch on a weekly basis. Prisoners can only make collect phone calls, at exorbitant rates. When they are transferred between facilities, mail is easily lost.

After release, parents must have housing before their children will be returned from foster care. Some children never return: after six months without contact between a parent and child, the

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state can charge the parent with "abandonment," and begin terminating parental rights. A parent whose rights are terminated cannot legally see his or her child again.

Ex-prisoners from families living in housing run by the city's Housing Authority may not be able to go home at all. A whole family can be evicted from public housing if one household member is accused or convicted of drug use or a violent crime. Other parolees can't return to families in local suburbs because, as condition of their parole, they cannot travel outside the five boroughs.

Studies have found that 15 to 27 percent of prisoners expect to go to homeless shelters upon release, a fact that prompted the Department of Homeless Services to begin working with the state's parole system to identify parolees among the shelter population. According to its Strategic Plan of June 2002, the department is actively seeking ways to place ex-offenders in permanent housing instead.

Programs That Work

With an average caseload of 87, parole officers focus more on keeping track of parolees than on helping them rebuild their lives. Social services are provided by other agencies, such as the state Office of Mental Health, whose LINK team works with up to 100 mentally ill prisoners a year, helping them apply for public benefits, housing, and treatment before release, and providing guidance immediately after their release. The state's Office of Alcohol and Substance Abuse Services operates a referral service for the 500 parolees who need treatment each month. The state's Department of Corrections recently launched Project Greenlight at Queensborough Correctional Facility. Greenlight offers skills training, job readiness, family reintegration, and drug treatment before release, and brings in community organizations to explain their aftercare services.

The New York City Education and Training Coalition lists 47 member agencies on its website that serve ex-offenders. Dozens more offer employment-related services among their other programs. Employers can claim a federal tax credit of up to \$2,400 during an ex-offender's first year at work, or hire inmates under a bonding program that insures against theft. Despite these efforts, as of 1998, 60 percent of former New York State prisoners were unemployed. South Forty Employment and Training Services, now part of the Osborne Association, offers "Guidelines for Managing a Successful Vocational and Job Placement Program for Ex-Prisoners" on its [website](#). Based on the program's thirty years of experience working with ex-offenders, they recommend beginning services before prisoners are released, aggressively recruiting employers and building long-term relationships with them, and continually upgrading job developers' skills.

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The Queens Plaza Connection

In November 2002, the Fortune Society softened the impact of at least one policy of the criminal justice system. Rikers Island discharges many inmates by dropping them off at Queens Plaza between 2 a.m. and 6 a.m., with a Metrocard and \$1.50. Now the Fortune Society has [opened](#) a 24-hour drop-in center there. Already, nearly one out of every five ex-offenders dropped off at Queens Plaza is using the drop-in center. Some set up appointments before their release; others accept the invitation from staff members, who meet each arriving bus. A few choose just to have coffee and rest in a place where they are welcome, but most work with the 14-person staff to find health services, housing, shelter, and job services. Like other agencies serving ex-offenders, the Fortune Society is concerned about potential budget cuts at the city, state and federal levels of government.

"More people are being released and there are fewer supports for them," says Jamie Dorton of the Fortune Society. She doesn't foresee making up for lost public funding with private donations, as these have lessened with the economic downturn. "We don't want to think about it, but most people eventually come back from prison." The harder it is for them to find their way back into community life, the easier it will be for them to return to prison.

Linda Ostreicher, a former budget analyst for the New York City Council, is a freelance writer and consultant to nonprofits.