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Breaking Out of the Prison Cycle

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“Costs of Incarceration Rising in US.” The headline is familiar and unremarkable. It could be from the last decade or last week, from a local tabloid or a national newspaper. The article will review the usual statistics—the United States has the largest prison population in the world, recidivism rates continue to climb—and will conclude that the American prison system needs substantial reforms. Few disagree with this honest assessment, but even fewer are inspired to act. In national conversations about budgets and national debt, incarceration is rarely considered, and comprehensive changes are rarely proposed. Meanwhile, current imprisonment practices are inflicting multigenerational damages on the United States economy. Given the immediate costs of the prison industry, the socioeconomic effects of imprisonment on the individual, and the long-term economic consequences of incarceration, Americans must demand prison reform now.

Statistics: The Silent Alarm

Of all the costs of incarceration, the day-to-day expenses are perhaps the most difficult to ignore. By most estimates, the United States spends over \$74 billion annually on its prisons. Ten states now spend more on imprisonment than they do on higher education—six times more, in the case of California. JoAnne Page, CEO of the Fortune Society, a New York-based nonprofit that specializes in prisoner reentry and alternatives to incarceration, told the HPR that these costs are increasing “more than anything else ... [because] the average length of stay is going up.” Indeed, from 1990 to 2009, the average length of stay for prisoners increased by 2.9 years. As a result of this progression, the prison population is not only growing, but also aging. Due to costs of healthcare, prisoners over the age of 50 are twice as expensive to house on average. As these costly trends continue, experts estimate that prison expenditures will consume nearly a third of the Department of Justice’s budget by 2020.

Marginalized Upon Release

When an ex-convict leaves prison, he or she has a 40 percent chance of returning within three years. This alarmingly high rate of recidivism is due in part to the difficulty that ex-convicts face in reentering the job market. Former New Jersey Governor James McGreevey spoke with the HPR about his work with female ex-convicts through the Integrity House, an organization that provides treatment, community, and employment assistance to drug addicts. He said, of finding jobs for ex-convicts, “it’s difficult, it’s aggravating ... as opposed to the Scarlet letter A, we have the letter F for felonies.” Often, the biggest obstacle that former prisoners must confront is the social stigma surrounding ex-convicts. In many jurisdictions, it is legal to ask about a prospective employee’s prior convictions and to deny employment on that basis. Nicole Porter, Director of Advocacy for The Sentencing Project, told that HPR that “in some jurisdictions, they ask ... if you’ve ever been arrested.” Ex-convicts are essentially excluded from “full participation in the job force.”

Beyond the confining social stigma, ex-convicts must face other significant hurdles before returning to work. Three key barriers to employment affect prisoners disproportionately:

lack of education, drug addiction, and racial discrimination. The average inmate's lack of education is sometimes addressed in prison college or skilled labor programs. However, over the last few years, these programs have become increasingly scarce due to budget cuts. Page observes that since "most college programs in prisons died ... people are coming out with less of an [educational] edge than they used to have."

The second obstacle, drug addiction, is also sometimes addressed in prison, though inadequately so. While 65 percent of American inmates are clinically addicted to drugs, only 11 percent receive any form of treatment. Even if convicts temporarily break their addictions while in prison, they often relapse upon release. The lack of mandatory treatment perpetuates the pattern of drug addictions leading to drug-related convictions.

Lastly, racial discrimination is amplified at all stages of the incarceration process. Numerous studies show that African-American males are arrested, convicted, and then denied employment opportunities at disproportionately high rates. Nobel Laureate in Economics and Columbia professor Joseph Stiglitz explained to the HPR that "discrimination against incarcerated blacks is much worse over their lifetime" as compared to other groups.

Facing drug addiction and racial discrimination, without education or an impetus to change their behavior, ex-convicts often return to the life of crime that originally landed them in jail. High recidivism rates reveal that the American prison system is ultimately self-defeating by permanently removing prisoners from the job market.

Mobility in Chains

The barriers to reentry have consequences not only for individuals but also for families and communities across multiple generations. Studies show that when parents are incarcerated, between 50 and 70 percent of children will start acting up in school and struggling with academics. Increases in physically aggressive behavior and unstable mental health are also observed. In the long-term, these effects can lead to the children committing crimes and ending up in prison themselves. A similar cycle exists at the community level; once a neighborhood develops a crime-ridden reputation, a self-fulfilling prophecy proceeds. Porter blames this cycle in part on police and prosecutors' "targeting of specific neighborhoods where there are high rates of incarceration," also often communities of color.

From an even broader perspective, incarceration can be devastating for social mobility. Page notes that, as whole communities cycle in and out of the prison system, "we're moving closer and closer towards a multigenerational underclass," or "at least a huge difference in social mobility." The United States has both the largest prison population in the world, and by most metrics, the least upward mobility of any developed nation. Stiglitz and others believe these two factors are related:

When we have an incarceration system that stigmatizes large numbers of particular groups and impedes their ability to become constructive members of the labor force, then we're wasting large amounts of human resources and creating large social problems. ... There must be a large intergenerational transmission of poverty.

Breaking the Cycle

Piecemeal reform will not alleviate the structural economic burden of the prison system. Advocacy groups, nonprofits, and researchers generally approach prison reform from two angles: rehabilitating the individual and changing policies. At the Integrity House in New Jersey, Governor McGreevey and his colleagues focus on providing female convicts who are also drug addicts with treatment and employment opportunities. McGreevey describes their approach: “everyone works, we have a self-governing therapeutic community, [and] everyone participates in treatment.” The results of the Integrity House program are impressive: 100 percent of the women in the program find employment, and their recidivism rate is down from 55 to 22 percent. McGreevey insists that the success of their program is due not to the employment opportunities but to the set of values and morals that the program’s environment instills in each ex-convict.

In addition to working with ex-convicts on an individual basis, the Fortune Society also advocates for broader policy reform. Page describes the wide range of functions that the organization serves. “We work with people around issues like getting a job, like maintaining sobriety. ... We teach parenting, we work with people to get their children out of foster care, [and] we house people,” she explained. Page supports a range of incarceration alternatives, such as drug addiction treatment options, to be included alongside the current system. These programs would ideally reduce the overflowing populations of prisons and decrease the likelihood that offenders would return to a life of crime. Other alternatives demand a complete overhaul of the prison system, replacing the emphasis on punishment with an emphasis on prisoner rehabilitation. While the costs may initially appear high, McGreevey and Page argue that these alternatives are smart investments. At the Integrity House, McGreevey reported that “the reduction in recidivism has more than paid for our costs.”

While the Integrity House and the Fortune Society have seen successes at the county and state level, the road to prison reform is long. The immediate costs of housing the world’s largest prison population are staggering and increasing exponentially as incarceration rates and sentence lengths continue to climb. When the immediate costs are considered together with ex-convicts’ barriers to employment and the system’s effects on social mobility, an even bleaker prognosis emerges. The billions of tax dollars currently shoveled into the system could be used to rehabilitate prisoners, reduce crime and return hundreds of thousands to the work force, but instead these tax dollars are burned to perpetuate the cycle of conviction and poverty. This all-too-familiar prognosis must be read with far more urgency than a purely statistical review would demand. The work of dedicated groups on the local level might be enough to break a few communities out of the prison cycle, but lasting reform for the United States will require a policy revolution.