



## A FEW BASICS: WHAT FAITH COMMUNITIES SHOULD KNOW ABOUT PRISONER REENTRY & COMMUNITY SUPERVISION (PAROLE):

- ❖ Individuals who are released from prison face a host of issues upon release: attaining benefits, managing parole conditions, familial expectations, substance abuse issues, finding work, and mental and physical health issues.
  - The Harlem area is rich in reentry resources. We have created a “key reentry resources” guide of vetted community organizations that provide reentry services in the Harlem area. The Upper Manhattan Reentry Task Force hosts “Drop-In” Hours at the Harlem Community Justice Center for anyone returning from incarceration. When unsure how to guide any individual who walks through your doors, feel free to send them to us during our drop-in hours on Tuesdays from 1-4pm (170 E. 121<sup>st</sup>, btwn Lex and 3<sup>rd</sup>), or to call Anisah Thompson at any time at 212.360. 8747.
  - A more extensive guide of resources can be found at:  
[http://www.courtinnovation.org/UM\\_Reentry\\_Resource.pdf](http://www.courtinnovation.org/UM_Reentry_Resource.pdf)
- ❖ When acting as an advocate, mentor, or spiritual advisor, it is important to understand, and be mindful of, the constraints on an individual’s liberty under parole supervision.
  - Over 80% of individuals who are released from prison on parole “owe” prison time. This means that they have been let out of prison on the condition that they follow set rules, and can be sent back to prison for a period time (i.e. revoked) for failing to obey any condition of their release.
  - Nearly all individuals must follow the following conditions: report to a parole officer, maintain a curfew, have parole approve their residence, allow a parole officer to search their home/place of work, remain in the state, notify parole officer of any police interaction, abstain from drug and alcohol use, go to drug treatment, seek and maintain employment.
  - Individuals on parole may have “special conditions” that prohibit them from having contact with certain people (usually co-defendants, former gang members, or a former partner) or living in certain areas (usually individuals convicted of sex offenses). DOCCS also has a policy against allowing individuals on parole to live with other individuals on parole. They may also deny a residence if the individual they would be living with has a criminal

White counterparts.<sup>57</sup> My experiences are rooted in New York State where similar trends have been found. As of January 1, 2011, among the 56,315 people incarcerated in New York prisons, nearly four out of five (78%) were persons of color.<sup>58</sup>

Most of those incarcerated are released.<sup>59</sup> The unprecedented number of people being released from prison, and the rate at which the release is occurring, makes reentry a pressing contemporary social problem. At least 95% of all people incarcerated in state facilities return to the community.<sup>60</sup> An even larger percentage of those who spend time in county and city jails return. In 2008, more than 735,000 returned to the community, declining somewhat in 2009 to 729,295.<sup>61</sup> In 2009, an average of 1,998 people were released from state or federal prison every day; this number does not include those released from county or city jails.<sup>62</sup> The condition of people returning to their communities should be of great public concern because the environment in which people are confined affects the psychological condition in which they return.<sup>63</sup> I found the prison experience traumatic because of the

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<sup>57</sup> Pollock, *supra* note 18, tbl. 3-2; Solveig Spjeldnes & Sara Goodkind, *Gender Differences and Offender Reentry: A Review of the Literature*, 48 J. OFFENDER REHABILITATION 314, 316 (2009).

<sup>58</sup> DAN BERNSTEIN, STATE OF N.Y. DEP'T OF CORR. SERVS., UNDER CUSTODY REPORT: PROFILE OF INMATE POPULATION UNDER CUSTODY ON JANUARY 1, 2011 2-3 (2011), available at [http://www.prisonpolicy.org/scans/nydocs/UnderCustody\\_Report2011.pdf](http://www.prisonpolicy.org/scans/nydocs/UnderCustody_Report2011.pdf).

<sup>59</sup> Richard P. Seiter & Karen R. Kadela, *Prisoner Reentry: What Works, What Does Not, and What is Promising*, 49 CRIME & DELINQUENCY 360, 366 (2003). Today, reentry of formerly incarcerated people back into society is a social problem.

<sup>60</sup> TIMOTHY HUGHES & DORIS JAMES WILSON, BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS, REENTRY TRENDS IN THE UNITED STATES (2003), available at <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/pub/pdf/reentry.pdf>.

<sup>61</sup> HEATHER C. WEST ET AL., BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS, PRISONERS IN 2009 4 (2010), available at <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/pub/pdf/p09.pdf>.

<sup>62</sup> *Id.*

<sup>63</sup> People who reenter the community following long periods of incarceration face many challenges. They often return in the same or worse condition than they were in before entering prison. They are likely to have few marketable skills and are hard to employ. Some suffer from mental illness. A portion of those in prison are HIV-positive or have AIDS. Overall, among people returning from prison and jail, very few have positive social supports; they have high rates of death by suicide, homicide, or overdoses from drug use. In addition, people released from prison have high rates of recidivism: three in ten reoffend within six months of their release, a rate that increases to two of three within three years after release. INCREASING PUBLIC SAFETY THROUGH SUCCESSFUL OFFENDER REENTRY: EVIDENCE-BASED AND EMERGING PRACTICES IN CORRECTIONS 7 (M.M. Carter et al. eds., 2007). Many return to prison following violations of conditions of release or commissions of crime; either scenario has a negative impact on public safety. *Id.*; Nicholas C. Larina, *Changes and Challenges for Counseling in the 21st Century*, in 1 ENCYCLOPEDIA OF COUNSELING 116, 116-19 (Frederick T.L. Leong et al. eds., 2008); HUGHES & WILSON, *supra* note 60; PATRICK A. LANGAN & DAVID J. LEVIN, BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS, RECIDIVISM OF PRISONERS RELEASED IN 1994 (2002), available at <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/rpr94.pdf>. Finally, when people do return from prison or jail, they tend to be concentrated in areas that are characteristically poor and that provide little economic opportunity. "The key tasks of communities, such as providing a sense of security and pride, a healthy environment for families, jobs, and open exchanges and support, are hampered when large numbers of the population are recycling in and out of correctional facilities and carrying with them the lasting consequences of incarceration." Ram A.

record, if they would have trouble entering the building, if the house has a “dangerous” animal (i.e. pit-bull), or if they deem the residence to be unfit.

- Individuals on parole cannot change residence without the permission of a parole officer, even if they are living in a shelter. No matter what the situation, an individual on parole cannot stay away from the approved residence overnight (even a shelter) without the parole officer’s permission. Although you may have the best intentions in helping someone find housing, you must remember that the individual **MUST** seek approval from his parole officer before moving, or even attending an intake appointment for housing.
  
- ❖ The risk of recidivism is highest in the initial weeks and months following release from prison.
  - Some individuals experience a tremendous amount of hope and motivation upon release, imagining reunions with loved ones and the potential of a new start. Frequently, after a few weeks or months, the reality of the obstacles they face become very real, and he/she begin feeling discouraged and hopeless. Front loading supportive resources from the community during this time is key during this risky period.
  
- ❖ Risk of recidivism is greatly reduced when attention is paid to criminogenic needs.
  - Criminogenic needs are needs that are associated with criminal conduct. The top four criminogenic needs are antisocial attitudes, beliefs and values, antisocial peers and certain personality and temperamental factors. The next four criminogenic need areas are family and/or marital stressors, lack of employment stability, achievement/educational achievement, lack of pro-social leisure activities and substance abuse.
  - Faith based communities can be helpful in targeting all of these criminogenic need areas by offering groups and/or mentoring relationships that encourage pro-social behavior, helping individuals learn to recognize risky thinking and feelings, build problem solving capacity and negotiate personal relationships.
  - The quality of relationships and types of interactions between individuals working with ex-offenders may be as or more important to risk reduction than the specific programs. Training individuals in reentry capacities at places of worship on evidenced based practices such as motivational interviewing, positive reinforcement, and cognitive behavioral techniques is imperative for effectively targeting criminogenic needs.
  
- ❖ Research has indicated that “informal social controls” occurring in an individual’s “natural community” (i.e. family, friends, congregation) are more effective in creating behavior change than formal controls (i.e. law enforcement).

assaults and murders I witnessed while incarcerated, because of the constant threat of violence, because of the number of suicides that took place, and because I felt utterly helpless about the degree to which I could protect myself. I found the experience extremely stressful — during my incarceration, I was tense and always on guard because the threat of violence was real and ever present. In this piece, I will relate only a few examples of what I endured to show that prison is indeed a site of trauma and that, as a result, we should be more concerned about the conditions inside correctional facilities and the state in which the formerly incarcerated reenter society.

## II. THE INCARCERATION EXPERIENCE

During the twenty-five years I spent in prison, I was incarcerated in several of New York State's maximum-security prisons. Today, they are like my alma maters: Sing Sing, Comstock, Green Haven, Auburn, Clinton, Sullivan, Attica, and Eastern New York State Prison. The shock of being sentenced following my jury trial took my breath away. In 1979, at the age of twenty-three, I was convicted of violating New York State's Criminal Procedure Law 125.25 — murder in the second degree — and was given an indeterminate sentence with a minimum of twenty-five years and a maximum term of life to be served in a New York State prison. At twenty-three years old, a twenty-five-year minimum sentence was more time than I had been alive. Twenty-five years was a lifespan — my lifespan. I was stunned by it — stunned after hearing the numbers, stunned after learning that the maximum term was life. I had a hard time adjusting to the idea of twenty-five years to life. It was unimaginable. I never positively adjusted to the idea of being in prison.

I remain haunted by the memories and images of violence — violence I experienced, violence I witnessed, and violence that I heard or learned about. I can still see the murders I witnessed. I still see the image of a person being hit at the base of his skull with a baseball bat on a warm, sunny afternoon during recreation hours. The entire scene plays like a silent movie. He is smashed in the back of his head, crumbles, and falls to the ground. While he lays helpless on the ground, his head is smashed again and again until the sight of blood seems to satisfy his attacker. I watch as the perpetrator then calmly returns the baseball bat to the location where he had retrieved it and just walks away as if nothing had happened, while others entering the yard area walk around the lifeless body.

I can still see the rapid hammering motions of a hand plunging an ice pick-like object into the back of another person standing with his hands in his pockets. Perhaps he died as he was falling to the ground. The stabs were so powerful that the victim fell face forward, like the ground was preparing