

PRISONER REENTRY, RELIGION AND RESEARCH



Overview

American prisons at the beginning of the twenty-first century are in crisis. Perhaps the most pervasive problem challenging modern corrections is the ominous nexus of overburdened prison systems and record numbers of prisoners returning to communities each year. Today, exponential increases in incarceration have resulted in more than two million prisoners and well over a half million ex-prisoners reentering communities each year. Other challenges include escalating confinement costs in an economic climate of increasing demand for services and declining resources. While formidable, these challenges provide an opportunity to think more broadly about prospective partners in navigating the prisoner reentry landscape. The following discusses trends in corrections, the role of religion in reentry, and current research. This brief points out that the faith community is perhaps a partner

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in prisoner reentry—promoting public safety via the provision of services to support the successful reintegration of returning prisoners.

Trends in Corrections: Prisoners and Prisoner Reentry

The United States incarcerated 2.1 million persons at yearend 2002. This total represents a 2.6% annual increase in the number of persons held in Federal and State prisons (1,361,258), territorial prisons (16,206), local jails (665,475), Immigration and Naturalization Service facilities (8,748), military facilities (2,377), jails in Indian country (1,912), and juvenile facilities (110,284). During the same period, the rate of incarceration in prison was 701 inmates per 100,000 U.S. residents, or 1 in every 143 U.S. residents in prison or jail. At yearend 2002, State prisons were operating at as much as 17% above capacity and Federal

Table 1. Number of Prisoners Held in State or Federal Prisons or in Local Jails 1995-2002

| Year | Total inmates in custody | Federal | State | Inmates in Jail on June 30 | Incarceration Rate |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|---------|-----------|----------------------------|--------------------|
| 1995 | 1,585,586 | 89,538 | 989,004 | 507,044 | 601 |
| 1996 | 1,646,020 | 95,088 | 1,032,440 | 518,492 | 618 |
| 1997 | 1,743,643 | 101,755 | 1,074,809 | 567,079 | 648 |
| 1998 | 1,816,931 | 110,793 | 1,113,676 | 592,462 | 669 |
| 1999 | 1,893,115 | 125,682 | 1,161,490 | 605,943 | 691 |
| 2000 | 1,937,482 | 133,921 | 1,176,269 | 621,149 | 684 |
| 2001 | 1,961,247 | 143,337 | 1,180,155 | 631,240 | 685 |
| 2002 | 2,033,331 | 151,618 | 1,209,640 | 665,475 | 701 |
| Percent change 2001-2002 | 3.7% | 5.8% | 2.5% | 5.4% | |
| Average Annual Increase 1995-2002 | 3.6% | 7.8% | 2.9% | 4.0% | |

Source: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Bulletin, Prisoners in 2002, July 2003.

prisons were operating at 33% above capacity. Table 1 presents data on the number of prisoners held in Federal or State prisons or in local jails over the past several years.¹

The correctional population also includes more than 4.7 million adult men and women on probation or parole at yearend 2002. This total represents a record high in the number of U.S. residents being supervised in the community. As the new millennium advances, the total Federal, State, and local adult correctional population, including those incarcerated and those being supervised in the community, has reached a new high of 6.7 million. At the end of 2002, about 3.1% of the U.S. adult population, or 1 in every 32 adults, were incarcerated or on probation or parole. Table 2 presents data on the number of persons under adult correctional supervision.²

Over the past two decades, exponential increases in incarceration have resulted in more than two million prisoners and over 600,000 ex-prisoners reentering

communities each year. Research findings reveal a trend toward record numbers of prisoners returning home having spent longer terms behind bars. Other findings suggest that returning prisoners are less prepared for life on the outside and that assistance in their reintegration is inadequate.³ Still other findings indicate that most prisoners returning home have difficulties reconnecting with families, housing, and jobs—and many remain plagued by substance abuse and health problems.⁴

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Today, repeat criminal behavior is among the most troublesome issues facing corrections planners and policymakers. Research results show that 62 percent of state prisoners are rearrested within 3 years after release.

Other results show that 41 percent of releases are returned to incarceration. Still other results show that 42 percent of parolees are returned to incarceration following discharge from parole supervision.⁵ The cycle of imprisonment among large numbers of individuals, mostly minority men, is increasingly concentrated in urban communities that already

Table 2. Persons Under Adult Correctional Supervision

| Year | Total Estimated Correctional Population | Community Supervision | | Incarceration | |
|---|---|-----------------------|---------|---------------|-----------|
| | | Probation | Parole | Jail | Prison |
| 1995 | 5,342,900 | 3,077,861 | 679,421 | 597,044 | 1,078,542 |
| 1996 | 5,490,700 | 3,164,996 | 679,733 | 518,492 | 1,127,528 |
| 1997 | 5,734,900 | 3,296,513 | 694,787 | 567,079 | 1,176,564 |
| 1998 | 6,134,200 | 3,670,441 | 696,385 | 592,462 | 1,224,496 |
| 1999 | 6,340,800 | 3,779,922 | 714,457 | 605,943 | 1,287,172 |
| 2000 | 6,445,100 | 3,826,209 | 723,898 | 621,149 | 1,316,333 |
| 2001 | 6,581,700 | 3,931,731 | 732,333 | 631,240 | 1,330,007 |
| 2002 | 6,732,400 | 3,995,165 | 753,141 | 665,475 | 1,367,856 |
| Percent Change 2001-02 | 2.3% | 1.6% | 2.8% | 5.4% | 2.8% |
| Average Annual Percent Change 1995-2002 | 2.8% | 3.1% | 1.5% | 4.0% | 3.5% |

Source: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Bulletin. Probation and Parole in the United States, 2002. August 2003.

encounter enormous social and economic disadvantages.⁶ Table 3 presents the most recent data on the number of persons leaving prison and returning to communities across the country.

Table 3. Number of State and Federal Inmates Released

| Year | Number of Inmates Released* |
|------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1990 | 423,800 |
| 1995 | 474,300 |
| 1996 | 488,700 |
| 1997 | 514,300 |
| 1998 | 546,600 |
| 1999 (projected) | 565,700 |
| 2000 (projected) | 600,000 |

Source: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. State and Federal Prisoners Returning to the Community.

April 2000. Note: * Inmates with sentences of > than one year only.

The increasing volume of returning prisoners has severe consequences for public safety, state budgets, and society. First, there are public safety concerns. Nearly two-thirds of released prisoners are rearrested for a felony or serious misdemeanor within three years of their release. Rising recidivism rates among returning prisoners translate into thousands of new victimizations each year. Second, there are fiscal implications. Significant portions of state budgets are now invested in the criminal justice system. Expenditures on corrections alone increased from \$9 billion in 1982 to \$53 billion in 1999. These figures do not include the cost of arrest and sentencing processes, nor do they take into account the cost to victims. Third, there are far-reaching social costs. Prisoner reentry carries the potential for profound collateral consequences, including public health risks, disenfranchisement, homelessness,

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and weakened ties among families and communities.⁷

Religion and Reentry: The Role of the Church

Since the beginning of prisons and jails, religion has influenced philosophies of punishment and rehabilitation. Whether motivated by religious beliefs or a sense of civic duty, “the church” has helped direct the course of modern corrections. For more than a century, the church has been relied upon to provide spiritual guidance and support to prisoners. The church has also provided, and continues to provide, a wide-range of secular services to prisoners, ex-prisoners, and their families. Traditionally, these services include the provision of food, shelter and clothing. Other services involve education, employment, and housing assistance. Still other services include crime prevention, substance abuse counseling and treatment, and victim assistance in communities across the nation. Today, the services provided via the church are vital to increasing public safety. In many instances, local churches provide the aforementioned services in poor, urban environs that are disproportionately impacted by incarceration.

Over the past 25 years, there has been a resurgence of religion in corrections. As a result, increasingly diverse faith practices have entered prison settings, and the number of religious services and activities has increased. Today, a variety of faiths are practiced in correctional facilities and there is wide variance among types of religious program services.

While fiscal constraints have reduced religious programming in some instances, nearly every state and federal correctional institution provides support for the four “traditional” denominations—Catholicism, Protestantism, Islamism, and Judaism.⁸

The revival of religion in corrections settings is partly attributed to growth in church membership. Research on the largest religious bodies in the United States show that the Roman Catholic Church reported the largest membership (62 million). Other results show that the Southern Baptist Convention recently reported 15.7 million members. In addition, the United Methodist Church reported 8.4 million members and the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc. reported a membership of 8.2 million. Finally, the Church of God in Christ, perhaps the nation's largest predominantly black denomination, reported 5.4 million members in 1991 and estimated 8.5 million members in 2000.⁹ Recent trends in church membership suggest both continuity and change among Christians, and an increase in the number of Jews and Muslims. These data also suggest that church members are potential partners in prisoner reentry—particularly in urban communities, which have experienced exponential growth among “non-denominational” Protestants.¹⁰

The historic role of the church combined with its potential for volunteer resources uniquely position the faith community to support the successful reintegration of returning prisoners. While the church has historically been in the business of enhancing social services, relatively few faith-based organizations have developed formal partnerships aimed at reducing crime problems. In recent years, however, the faith community has gained prominence in the provision of a variety of criminal justice program services (e.g., life skills development). As a result, federal and state funding for promising faith-based programs to continue their “good works” in partnership with criminal justice agencies is expected to increase.¹¹

Religiosity and Research: Delinquency, Crime and Recidivism

The extant body of research literature is consistent with criminological theories supporting the claim that religious

beliefs are inversely related to delinquency, crime and recidivism.^{12 13} Johnson, De Li, Larson and McCullough (2000) conducted a systematic review of the religiosity and delinquency literature. Results show that the literature is not disparate or contradictory, as previous studies have suggested. Religious measures were generally inversely related to juvenile delinquency in the 13 studies that used reliability testing of religious measures. These findings also show that religiosity had a negative effect on deviance in the most methodologically rigorous studies. While many of the studies did not use random sampling, multiple indicators to control measurement errors, or reliability testing of their measures, the higher-quality studies generally found a negative relationship between religiosity and delinquency.¹⁴

There is also a growing body of empirical evidence indicating that religious beliefs reduce crime and recidivism among adult prisoners. Johnson and Larson (2003) conducted a preliminary evaluation of the InnerChange Freedom Initiative, a faith-based prisoner reform program. Results show that program graduates were 50 percent less likely to be rearrested

and 60 percent less likely to be re-incarcerated during a two-year follow-up period.¹⁵ Similarly, Johnson, Larson, and Pitts (1997) estimated the impact of religious programs on institutional adjustment and recidivism rates in two matched groups of inmates from four adult male prisons in New York State. One group had participated in programs sponsored by Prison Fellowship (PF) and the other had no involvement with PF. Results show that PF and non-PF inmates are similar on measures of institutional adjustment (measured by both general and serious prison infractions) and recidivism (measured by arrests during a one-year follow-up period). However, after controlling for level of involvement in PF-sponsored programs, inmates who were most active in Bible studies were significantly less likely to be rearrested during the follow-up period.¹⁶

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In addition, Johnson and Larson (1996) in a study of the relevance of religion in facilitating inmate rehabilitation find that prison culture and the cost of quality treatment programs are among the primary obstacles to prisoner rehabilitation. The authors suggest that religious programs may mollify these barriers. Utilizing a comprehensive research approach, this study provides at least partial support for a framework that helps explain how religious programming may be uniquely suited to both facilitate and augment the ongoing process of prisoner reentry. Results show that religious programs combat the negative effects of prison culture and that religious volunteers are a largely untapped resource pool available to administer educational, vocational, and treatment services at little or no cost.¹⁷

The aforementioned findings suggest that faith is the forgotten factor in reducing crime problems and religious program research may hold a valuable key to developing criminal justice system solutions.¹⁸ While these and other prior research findings are promising, the prisoner reentry crisis combined with the resurgence of religion in prisons reveal the need for further research. Rigorous research combined with strong methodology is required to determine the relevance of religion in facilitating prisoner reentry and reintegration. Additional research is also essential to examine the efficacy of religious programs and their ability to foster pro-social attitudes among prisoners, ex-prisoners, and their families. In addition, further research is necessary to provide information regarding the therapeutic integrity of religious programs as compared to secular alternatives.

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Compassion Capital Fund Research: Kairos Horizon Program Evaluation

The Compassion Capital Fund (CCF) supported four separate research projects, one of which was awarded to Caliber Associates to evaluate the Kairos Horizon Program at Tomoka Prison in Daytona Beach, Florida. The Horizon program

is an outgrowth of Kairos Prison Ministry begun in 1976, which has over 20,000 active volunteers in 270 prisons in the U.S. and abroad. Kairos Horizon Communities, a faith-based residential rehabilitation program for prisoners and their families, seek to address the whole person, by offering mental, spiritual, and emotional support. Begun in 1999, the goals of the yearlong program are to increase personal responsibility, family responsibility and employability. These goals are achieved through volunteer-led programs including informal mentoring, anger and stress management, family relations and fatherhood, financial management, addiction recovery and education. Prisoners in the program also participate in daily devotionals and their choice of religious services. The program at Tomoka Correctional Institution in Daytona Beach (FL) was implemented in 1999, and is the main focus of the ongoing evaluation.

Caliber's approach involves a comprehensive literature review, goals assessment, and program evaluation. The primary objectives of the study are: (1) to determine the role of the program in supporting individual prisoners, their families, and communities; and (2) to evaluate whether the program represents a "best practice" for providing services to inmates and their families. Key research questions to be addressed are: (1) what are the goals of relevant State agencies and systems for inmates nearing release and their families; (2) how does the program operate in a prison setting; and (3) what are the effects of the program on participants and their families?

The current research focuses on pre- and post-release effects of the Horizon program on graduates, their families, the community, and relevant agencies/institutions. Our team is currently collecting matched-comparison group data from prison records, inmates and their families, and official records involving infractions, recidivism, employment, and reliance on public aid. Research results are expected to: (1) contribute much to the advancement of knowledge in the field regarding surviving prisoner reentry; (2) identify promising program attributes that facilitate prisoner rehabilitation and reentry;

and (3) determine whether and under what circumstances program participation is likely to reduce crime and recidivism, the sine qua non of desirable correctional interventions.

Conclusion and Next Steps

American prisons are in crisis. Overcrowded prison systems, record numbers of prisoners returning home, and escalating confinement costs have profound implications for corrections and communities. The faith community, however, is perhaps a partner in prisoner reentry, and is uniquely positioned to provide a variety of services to support the successful reintegration of returning prisoners. Religious program research may hold a valuable key to developing criminal justice system solutions. Further research is required to determine whether and under what circumstances faith-based programs reduce crime and recidivism. The next two issue briefs will provide more detailed information on the ongoing Horizon program evaluation and contribute much to what we know about faith-based interventions and prisoner reentry.

Endnotes

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