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Prosperity and Growth

From Prison to Work: A Proposal for a National Prisoner Reentry Program

The growth of the penal system over the past thirty years has been a significant factor in redrawing the landscape of urban poverty in America. Prisons and jails now hold 2.25 million inmates—most of them minorities and poorly educated young men. Swelled largely by drug offenders and parole violators, state and federal prisons currently return more than seven hundred thousand prisoners each year to their communities. Roughly two-thirds of these ex-prisoners are rearrested within three years of release. About half of ex-prisoners who return to jail are returned for non-violent, technical violations of parole. Although growth in the prison population has helped reduce crime rates over the past decade, reincarcerating so many ex-prisoners has proven costly not only for the states that must foot the bill, but also for families, communities, and the overall economy. Studies show that incarceration is associated with reduced earnings and higher unemployment rates later in life, as well as increased rates of separation and divorce.

The inner-city neighborhoods to which most released prisoners return have high crime rates and few jobs. Under these conditions, a post-prison employment and support system could help rebuild communities and reduce incarceration rates. In a discussion paper for The Hamilton Project, Bruce Western of Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government proposes a national prisoner reentry program that would assist newly-released prisoners in obtaining employment and transitional services as they move from incarceration to community life. Specifically, Western proposes a prisoner reentry program that would be phased in over time and adjusted based on evidence about what works. The program would comprise four elements: (1) expanded in-prison correctional programs such as education and work training, (2) transitional employment after release, (3) parole reform to support the effectiveness of transitional jobs, and (4) the elimination of bans on some federal benefits for people with criminal records.

In Western's proposal, all parolees in need of work would receive a year of transitional employment, supplemented with housing assistance and substance abuse treatment. Roughly one-half to three-quarters of released prisoners are out of work in their first months after release. Western acknowledges that transitional service programs have had mixed results in the past, but he argues that steady employment is crucial to successful reentry because it creates routines and draws ex-prisoners out of criminal networks. Under Western's proposal, all parolees—prisoners on supervised release, which is about 70 percent of all annually released prisoners—who do not have guaranteed employment would be assigned to a post-release job as part of their discharge plan.

If half of all parolees need work immediately upon release, the transitional employment program would need to supply approximately 245,000 jobs annually. This transitional employment would last up to one year, although job placement services would aim to move prisoners into the open labor market more quickly. Participants in the program would engage in community service work, at the minimum wage and under the direction of a supervisor, maintaining parks, roads, or public buildings and grounds. This would provide ex-prisoners with valuable work experience, while simultaneously allowing them to contribute to the community. The combination of transitional employment, transitional housing, and drug treatment for prisoners with substance abuse problems, Western argues, would significantly improve the economic and social reintegration of former prisoners into their communities, and improve the quality of life in those communities.

Western argues that transitional employment is unlikely to facilitate reintegration by itself, however, and must be combined with carefully structured reforms to our parole system. By the early 2000s, parole violators accounted for one-third of state prison admissions. Yet Western notes that thousands of parolees each year are sent back to prison for what he terms *technical violations* of parole. Technical violations are nonviolent parole violations that do not customarily lead to imprisonment, such as losing a job, failing a drug test, or missing a meeting with parole officers. In some states, like California, more than half of ex-prisoners have their parole revoked for these types of violations. Although former prisoners should be held accountable for their behavior, Western views reentry into society as a learning process and suggests that nonviolent mistakes and relapses are a common part of this process. He argues that reincarcerating ex-offenders for technical violations hinders their ability to develop work skills and acquire prosocial behavior necessary for successful reintegration. Rather than automatically sending ex-prisoners back to prison for minor offenses, Western proposes a system of graduated sanctions in which parole officers could choose different disciplinary methods based on the severity of the offense. Reincarceration would remain an option for ex-prisoners who repeatedly violate parole or whose behavior is judged to pose a risk to society. Not only would curtailing reimprisonment for technical parole violations reduce prison populations, but it would also promote public safety by enhancing the effectiveness of transitional services, argues Western.

To facilitate reentry and reduce prison populations, Western suggests other policy reforms for prisoner reentry. First, he proposes eliminating bans on federal benefits for people with criminal records, such as bans on access to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and post-secondary education assistance. He argues that those who receive social supports are more likely to reintegrate successfully into normal life, and thus less likely to commit future crimes. Second, to equip prisoners with basic literacy and job skills, he proposes setting a national standard such that prisoners who are functionally illiterate or who do not have a high school diploma must enroll in 240 hours of education programs. Finally, he proposes improved discharge planning to accelerate a positive transition from prison to community. Western posits that national guidelines for discharge planning should recommend that a state's Department of Corrections prepare for a prisoner's release by resolving uncleared warrants and fines, providing prisoners with ID cards, and giving ex-prisoners employment, housing, and drug treatment referrals.

Western estimates that the total gross cost of his program nationally would be about \$8.5 billion per year, with transitional employment and housing services accounting for most of this cost. By reducing prison populations, Western seeks to shift funds for correction costs from custody to community supervision and programming, which is less expensive. Western explains that the gross costs of the program are offset in four main ways: (1) a net reduction in crime from improved reintegration, (2) higher lifetime earnings for ex-offenders and their families, (3) a reduction in prison populations, and (4) improved public works resulting from the work of transitionally employed parolees. Some of the benefits described by Western, particularly benefits to children of ex-offenders, are difficult to quantify but are clearly a social benefit. Western hopes that this proposal will create a national prisoner reentry program that reduces prison populations and facilitates social reintegration of ex-offenders, spurring increased employment, wages, and family stability.

The views expressed in this policy brief are not necessarily those of The Hamilton Project Advisory Council or the trustees, officers or staff members of the Brookings Institution. The paper will be discussed by a panel of experts that represent a wide spectrum of views on the issue of prisoner reentry reform.