

## **Educational Programs for Prisoners: A Policy Beyond Ideology**

Talk about a waste of money – and of lives. Two-thirds of the inmates released from U.S. state prisons are rearrested within three years of their release and more than half end up back in prison. With a recidivism rate that exceeds 50 percent and the costs of incarceration – not to mention the costs to society of crime - you'd think that public officials would have come up with a better way to deal with this situation than the revolving door that it has become.

The state of New Jersey has a better idea. The New Jersey Legislature just passed a number of bills aimed at combating recidivism. Included is the Education and Rehabilitation Act, which requires the state's Department of Corrections to ensure that incarcerated individuals attain a 12<sup>th</sup> grade education proficiency level. In other, words, people getting out of New Jersey state prisons will have a high school diploma or a GED to help them get jobs. The legislation also mandates review of vocational programs in prisons in order to meet the demands of required job skills and standards on the outside.

Why isn't New York State doing this? The state has 60,000 people in its prisons and releases about 25,000 each year, the overwhelming majority of them lacking a high school diploma. The state has the fifth highest rate of recidivism in the U.S. Educational programs in New York's state prisons were ended by Governor Pataki more than a decade ago. But here we have a state prison system with 75 percent black and Latino inmates who have nothing but time on their hands. A large number of those incarcerated are in prison for non-violent felonies, mostly drug convictions. They should not have been sent to a prison facility in the first place. Given that many have little formal education that could connect them with decent-paying jobs once they are released, the odds of their going back to criminal activities – and to prison again – are virtually certain.

### **An Incentive Program**

Governor Paterson and the state Legislature should be out front with an educational program and resources that help prison inmates to find jobs on the outside. Such a program can act as an incentive for inmates, cutting their sentences if they attain a high school diploma or a GED. This could not only help the formerly incarcerated; it would help strengthen the communities of color in New York City which are home to more than half of released prisoners. For them to find jobs in the community, of course, would help economically. But it would also strengthen the quality of life in other ways. Consider that the principal victims of crimes committed by so many of the formerly incarcerated are the very old and the very young.

The national unemployment rate for black males without a high school education just crept past 24 percent. People coming out of prison with a criminal record and no high school education are virtually unemployable. So why don't we have educational programs in our prisons?

“Soft on crime” is one reason. But it’s finally dawning on legislators of all political persuasions that high rates of incarceration - particularly for people convicted of non-violent crimes - is simply not sustainable from a cost standpoint, in addition to not deterring crime and further destabilizing low-income communities. Providing education for inmates that will help keep them from returning to prison is a policy beyond ideology.

Another argument against educational programs in prisons is the cost, especially in times of a recession and extreme budgetary constraints. But when we consider the cost of keeping someone in prison for a year – about \$30,000 in New York’s state prisons – it becomes evident that policies that prevent recidivism and provide a chance for employment for released prisoners are a good economic bargain.

### **Key Is Education**

My organization, the Community Service Society, is a founding member of the New York Reentry Roundtable, which was established to help facilitate the successful reentry of people leaving the prison system by advocating in the state legislature for the removal of employment barriers from various laws. But removing legal barriers to a job is insufficient if the individual lacks the educational skills to do that job. Assemblyman Jeff Aubry has introduced legislation (A8552) to bring back college courses to prisons. But with so many inmates who have not graduated high school, we need to emulate the New Jersey policy and ensure that people leaving prison have a high school diploma or GED. The key to employment for the formerly incarcerated is the acquisition of educational skills.

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