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Doing Time Long After the Crime: How a Prison Sentence Today is Only the Beginning of a Felon's Life-Long Sentence as a Pariah to Society

Mary Pollock, Liz Canfield

Abstract

This research seeks to explore the various difficulties in convicted felons' life after their transition back into society. The research examines how an ex-convict's finances, interpersonal relationships with friends, family, and romantic partners, lifetime opportunities, mental health, physical health, and living conditions are affected by the offender's status as such an offender, as well as to consider ways in which these difficulties can be alleviated for future ex-offenders upon re-assimilation into society after a prison sentence. Though indeed a broad topic, this particular brand of research seeks to highlight the exaggerated perception of the ex-con as a permanently damned member of society, condemned to the outer rims of their community, and forced to live a half-life while branded a criminal to all, even their loved ones.

Introduction

"People who have been convicted of felonies almost never enter the society they have inhabited prior to conviction. Instead, they enter a separate society, a world hidden from public view, governed by a set of repressive and discriminatory rules and laws that do not apply to everyone else. They become members of an undercaste (Alexander, 2011)." Such is the sad, timeless plight of the convicted felon in our day and age.

Felons are deprived of basic civil rights, like the right to vote and take part in many government assistance programs; They face immense difficulty when attempting to find appropriate living quarters, and even more-so when attempting to obtain gainful employment. As many as 41% of female inmates and 71% of male inmates are estimated to have some form of mental illness, but less than half receive adequate treatment both before and after incarceration (Mallik-Kane & Christy, 2008).

Almost as soon as a person is convicted of a felony crime, no matter how small, convicted felons are branded as no-good villains and a drain to society. Such negative perceptions should be addressed immediately for many reasons. As over 700,000 convicted felons are being released from prison each year and counting, combined with the fact that many of those convicted only committed non-violent, drug-related crimes, simply relegating those who have committed crimes to the edge of society is not an economically feasible, nor morally just way of addressing the issues related to prisoner reentry, overall decarceration, or communities deeply affected by mass incarceration.

Instead, appropriate avenues to take when addressing issues related to prisoner reentry would be to critically examine how mass incarceration affects a convicted felon's family ties, mental, and physical health problems, and economic opportunities.

Results/Discussion

I. Family Ties

- 40-69% of incarcerated men have at least two children (Hairston, 1998).
- 80% of incarcerated women have two or more children (Anderson-facile, 2009).
- Marital relationships are extremely strained and often end upon one partners' imprisonment; For incarcerated men, their wives only considered their most important source of support approximately 50% of the time (Hairston, 1998)
- The children of incarcerated parents most often experience depression, social stigmatization, and school-related difficulties, with other financial, familial, and interpersonal problems arising in different waves as well (Anderson-facile, 2009).
- The children of incarcerated parents are five times more likely to serve time in prison than are children whose parents are not incarcerated (Beck, Gilliard, & Greenfeld, 1993).
- Having community and family support provides stability to combat experiences and consequences of incarceration (Anderson-facile, 2009).

II. Employment and Living Condition Difficulties

- Public housing officials are free to reject applicants simply on the basis of their arrests, regardless of whether they result in convictions or fines (Alexander, 2011).
- One year after release, as many as 60% of people released from prisons are not employed in the regular labor market (Anderson-facile, 2009).
- A study conducted by the McCormick Institute of Public Affairs found that nearly a quarter of guests in homeless shelters had been incarcerated within the previous year-people who were unable to find somewhere to live after release from prison walls (Alexander, 2011)
- Ex-offenders often do not have the credit history, employment, rental history and pristine record necessary to obtain sufficient housing (Gunnison & Helfgott, 2011).
- Only 1/3 of prisoners received any skills-based education while in prison, and only 1/5 of prisoners have a job lined up upon release, which is often only a temporary position (Anderson-facile, 2009).
- Forty of the fifty-one jurisdictions in the United States required parolees to "maintain gainful employment." Failure to do so could mean more prison time (Alexander, 2011).

III. Mental and Physical Health Problems

- As more and more people are being imprisoned at younger ages, and increasing proportion of those young people will come out of prison hostile and angry, which will undoubtedly have negative effects on their neighborhoods (Anderson-facile, 2009).
- The Office of National Drug Control Policy reported that 70% to 85% of state prisoners required drug abuse rehabilitation, but only however, just 13% receive any kind of treatment while incarcerated (Anderson-facile, 2009).
- Although prisoners have a constitutional right to adequate healthcare while incarcerated, they are released into a society that is not bound to providing its constituents health care of any kind. Considering the fact that former prisoners have high rates of communicable diseases, this poses a great threat to public health (Puisis, 2013).
- Former prisoners with health problems were far less likely to find gainful employment than former prisoners who did not have a mental illness (Mallik-Kane & Christy, 2008).
- It was found that men and women with mental health conditions were less likely to be employed, worked for fewer months than the average reformed prisoner, and were less likely to have current employment when interviewed (Mallik-Kane & Christy, 2008).

Results/Discussion

IV. Ways to Address Common Prisoner Reentry Obstacles

- Social service and non-profit organizations should be developed that help develop public policies and programs that aid parents in maintaining meaningful ties with their family and children (Hairston, 1998).
- The decriminalization of drug use should also be implemented, as this will simultaneously contribute to weakening such a strong institution of racism as well as decarceration, as nearly 70% of those incarcerated are there for nonviolent drug-related crimes (Davis, 2003).
- Investing in effective reentry programs that center on substance abuse rehabilitation, education, and skills-based profession training may be the best option at present (Anderson-facile, 2009)
- Free or Reduced Healthcare and access to public housing that does not discriminate strictly on the basis of a felony is also crucial to a former prisoner's successful reentry (Davis, 2003).

Conclusion

While issues associated with prisoner reentry are complex and oftentimes multifaceted, making them very difficult to address adequately and at length, these are problems that have, in recent years, come to affect the overall public in significant and meaningful ways, with nearly all having negative connotations. As over 700,000 citizens are being released from prisons and reintegrated into society every year, rates of unemployment, crime, and public health issues are on a steady incline. If nothing is done to address these issues, then crime rates, unemployment, and the prevalence of communicable diseases will increase at a significant rate; the number of incarcerated felons is also likely to increase, as the recidivism rate is roughly 66%, and the children of incarcerated felons are five times more likely to be incarcerated themselves when compared to other children. For the sake of the nation, as well as those communities who have been deeply fragmented by mass incarceration, appropriate steps need to be taken to reduce recidivism, encourage rehabilitation and education, and to destigmatize the status of 'felon.'

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