

Make Ex-Offender Community Reentry a Success:

Addressing Access to Alcohol

Background

The facts are alarming: as of December 31, 2001, there were an estimated 5.6 million adults who had ever served time in State or Federal prison, including 4.3 million former prisoners and 1.3 million adults in prison. If recent incarceration rates remain unchanged, an estimated 1 of every 15 persons (6.6 percent) will serve time in a prison during their lifetime. Ninety-seven percent of all offenders in prison will be released at some point, and 650,000 of them are released each year.

One serious problem affects an overwhelming number of ex-offenders: Three out of four state prisoners released annually abuse alcohol and/or

Second chance becomes last chance if substance abuse prevention and treatment are not part of a community's response to reentry.

– James Copple

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drugs. These substance abuse problems, left untreated, are major barriers on the path to successful reentry. The problems are shared by us all, because most ex-offenders return to their old neighborhoods, where two-thirds of them are re-arrested within three years after being released.¹ And that, says Senator Sam Brownback (R-KS), “represents our failure to realize that preparing prisoners for reentry is a major public safety issue.”

Reentry problems also have a disproportionate effect on a small number of communities. Knowing this, and targeting services like alcohol and drug treatment and community redevelopment dollars to places like these where the need is greatest, can significantly improve individual ex-offenders’ chance of reentry success.

Reentry refers to the process that these prisoners (mostly male and disproportionately nonwhite) make in transitioning from incarceration back into society. High recidivism rates reflect a failure to successfully make that transition. Practically, it means thousands of new crimes (with new victims) are committed each year, at least half of which might be averted through improved prisoner reentry efforts.² In addition to the horrible personal costs, the issue is costly for governments and taxpayers as well. The high costs of incarcerating so many people has made corrections spending the fastest, or second-fastest, growing item in state budgets over the last 15 years, from \$9 billion in 1982 to \$60 billion a year in 2002.

Reentry Policies are the Key to Success

The key to reducing recidivism is in taking serious steps to address the personal and environmental challenges faced by the inevitable reentry of the ex-offender into society. The Justice Department’s Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative describes some of the conditions that exacerbate problems with reentry and a return to criminal activity:

“Some correctional officials—under pressure to cut costs—have curtailed prison programs and services that could ameliorate factors that place inmates at higher risk of recidivism after release. Tougher sentencing laws have, in some cases, removed or limited inmates’ incentives to enter available treatment programs. Long, fixed prison terms for serious offenders can sometimes have the perverse effect of returning the most risky offenders to the community with the least control and supervision. There is sometimes little continuity between institutional programs and activities, offenders’ reentry plans, and the supervision and services they receive once released.”

These ex-offenders have many factors indicative of likely failure, if not addressed.

These include higher rates of substance abuse, as well as physical or mental disabilities; prior unemployment or low level employment; and a low high school graduation rate. *While the research is somewhat inconclusive, there is also a clear inference from the data that high alcohol densities contribute to violent environments which in turn would put those re-entering communities from prison at risk.* More research is needed on this connection. Further, the reality of the alcohol density in many of the neighborhoods of ex-offenders fuels access and threatens the safety of these neighborhoods.³

We know from long experience that if [former prisoners] can’t find work, or a home, or help, they are much more likely to commit more crimes and return to prison...America is the land of the second chance, and when the gates of the prison open, the path ahead should lead to a better life.

– President George W. Bush
2004 State of the Union Address

Facts About State Prisoners Released Annually:

- ▼ 1 in 4 has a conviction for a violent offense
- ▼ 1 of 2 has had a violent offense conviction in his lifetime
- ▼ 3 of 4 have a substance abuse problem
- ▼ 2 of 3 will be rearrested within 3 years
- ▼ 55 percent have minor children, half of whom are under 10 years of age



Getting 'A Second Chance'

Several bills designed to address the myriad of offender reentry problems were introduced in late 2004 and are expected to be introduced shortly in both the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate. Sponsored by Rep. Rob Portman (R-OH) and Senator Sam Brownback (R-KS), the bills differ only slightly in their approach to these complex problems. Entitled "the Second Chance Act" (HR 4676 and S 2789 in the last Congress), the Act is designed to reduce recidivism/crime, increase public safety, and help states and communities with grants to allow them to address the growing populations of prisoners returning to their communities. The Act focuses on providing help and direction in jobs, housing, substance abuse/mental health treatment, and special services for families. Key elements of the Act include:

- **Funds for reentry programs:** grants to state and local governments for the development, implementation and expansion of re-entry programs, with funds for jobs, housing, substance abuse treatment/mental health, and services for families and children of incarcerated parents;
- **Best practices:** a National Offender Re-Entry Resource Center to collect and disseminate best practices and provide training and support around re-entry; plus, grants to evaluate parole violations and revocations;
- **An interagency federal task force:** to identify reentry resources, develop initiatives, establish a research agenda, and make recommendations to Congress;

We need to be both tough and smart on crime. Tough in keeping dangerous felons from returning and committing new crimes, but also smart in making sure that those who are coming home are given the most basic chance to start a new life and turn away from crime.

– Rep. Rob Portman (R-OH)

- **Mentoring:** grants totaling \$15 million each in FY 2006 and 2007 to community-based organizations for the mentoring of adult offenders or provision of transitional services; and
- **Alcohol/drug treatment:** the bill requires that there be an aftercare component to the residential alcohol/drug abuse treatment program and clarifies that such a program last at least six months with abusers set apart from the general prison population.

This legislation is a good start. The community and environmental issues that compound or threaten an individual's capacity to successfully re-enter the community must also be confronted. Emphasis on mentoring, job training, and treatment – while important – must not ignore the critical community issues that undermine reintegration into the host community. Confronting the challenges that influence safety and health in a community will be as important as facing the individual strategies that affect sobriety and personal health. Legislation and funding to support community efforts to reduce access to alcohol in difficult communities should emerge as a priority. These policy issues and enforcement strategies must become part of our overall strategy.

Benefits of Successful Reentry Programs

There are several significant benefits to developing and investing in a successful reentry program. Such a program:

- Protects those who might otherwise be victimized by ex-offenders who commit new crimes.
- Improves the likelihood that ex-offenders can pay fines, fees, restitution, and family support.
- Reduces the need to spend future funds on police and court costs, prison space and upkeep for prisoners.
- Contributes to breaking the cycle of addiction and restoring individuals to communities.
- Helps avoid other collateral consequences, including increased public health risks, homelessness and unemployment.
- Helps reduce the rate of alcohol and substance abuse among ex-offenders, which is good for the individual, as well as his family and community.
- Helps break the cycle of devastation that repeat crimes inflict on families, whose children are significantly more likely themselves to commit crimes or become addicted to alcohol and/or drugs.



Using Environmental Factors to Improve Reentry Success

Focus on the Community, As Well As Individuals

In addition to the personal factors affecting individual ex-offenders' chance of reentry success, several environmental factors are at play as well. The problem with the ex-offenders' surroundings is particularly acute because studies show that people released from prison and jail return in high concentrations to a small number of communities in each state. And it is these communities that are ill-equipped to serve, support and supervise them. For example:

- Almost half the prison and jail population in Connecticut comes from just five cities, which also have the highest rates of poverty and nonwhite populations.
- Only one-quarter of organizations that serve ex-offenders were located in any of the six Chicago communities to which the highest numbers of people returned in 2001. In two of those six neighborhoods, there were no such services at all.

The Re-Entry Policy Council, spearheaded by the Council of State Governments to assist state government officials grappling with the increasing number of people leaving prisons and jails to return to the communities they left behind, released a comprehensive report on the subject in 2005. The report asserts that "reintegrating prisoners successfully means therefore assisting not just individuals, but whole communities, so that they have the capacity to absorb their returning residents and to keep their neighborhoods safe."

Two environmental issues in particular deserve further attention, as they show great potential to help address reentry problems. These are the issues of the availability of alcohol and drug treatment, and the number of outlets in a neighborhood where alcohol can be purchased.

Alcohol and Drug Abuse Treatment Can Improve Chances

Substance abuse is a significant problem for ex-offenders, with some 70 to 80 percent having some history of alcohol or other drug abuse problem. Fifty-seven percent of federal and 70 percent of state inmates were regular drug users before prison. An increasing number of offenders also have mental health problems. Addressing these issues successfully is critically important because they can be determining factors as to whether or not the ex-offender assimilates successfully back into the community, or commits another crime and ends up back in prison. Rep. Portman asserts that if treatment is not sought or is not available upon release, then some kind of relapse is very likely. These relapses can often mean more crimes committed in already vulnerable families and communities.

Alcohol Density: A Critical Factor

There are several ways to help prevent substance abuse for ex-offenders. The answers involve a combination of approaches. Making treatment more readily available is one important factor.

This is addressed in both the Second Chances legislation as well as the Bush Administration's Offender Reentry Initiative. Another significant factor is also an environmental one, and involves looking at ways to make alcohol less readily available.

When offenders are released from prison or jail, they most often return to their former neighborhoods. For ex-offenders who were substance abusers, this can often contribute to their downfall. Here's why: researchers have found that often, their former neighborhoods also happen to have a much higher density of outlets that sell alcohol.⁴ This is particularly true in low-income neighborhoods. Where alcohol is more readily available, such as areas with greater outlet density, more drinking usually occurs and hence there is a greater likelihood that ex-offenders will be less inhibited.⁵ We must recognize, even with limited research, "The sheer volume of outlets complicates recovery for individuals seeking to address their alcoholism or alcohol influenced behavior. Many alcohol retailers in these neighborhoods offer discounted prices and promotions that encourage consumption or easy access to product."⁶

- One study found that a city of 50,000 residents in Los Angeles County with 100 alcohol outlets would experience an additional 3.4 assaults and 2.7 motor vehicle crashes per year if one new alcohol outlet opened.⁷
- A study of Newark, New Jersey, found that areas of the city with higher densities of alcohol outlets also had higher rates of violent crime. They also found that the alcohol outlet density rate was the single most important environmental factor explaining why violent crime rates were higher in certain areas of the city than in others.⁸
- A 1999 study of urban residential neighborhoods in New Orleans, using 1994-95 data, found that the more off-site alcohol outlets a neighborhood has, the more likely it is to have more homicides.⁹
- A study of 38 states and the District of Columbia found that there were higher alcoholism rates in states that had higher rates of on-premise alcohol outlets.¹⁰

There are at least two theories that help explain the relationship between outlet density and violence. One says that the alcohol itself lowers people's inhibitions against using violence to achieve their goals, as well as their ability to accurately interpret others' actions and intentions. The second says that it is the outlets themselves that define an environment in which social norms and external controls are weakened, making people in close proximity more likely to participate in activities which are illegal, dangerous or violent.

The issue has serious implications for the offenders, their families, their communities, not to mention government budgets. Knowing that the number of alcohol outlets directly and adversely impacts ex-offenders and their communities makes it worth looking at ways to reduce the number and availability of alcohol outlets as a way to reduce crime and violence.

Conclusion

The seriousness of the reentry of ex-offenders and the likelihood of re-offending makes a solid, comprehensive policy an imperative. The Second Chance Act is a highly regarded approach to this significant problem, which will positively address numerous aspects of this issue. In addition, improvements in environmental factors such as

- Creating healthy and safe communities
- Better access to substance abuse treatment
- Supporting Ordinances and Policies that limit alcohol outlet density in all neighborhoods
- Seeking first voluntary and/or mandatory closing hours for alcohol retailers in neighborhoods disproportionately affected by crime, violence, and substance abuse
- Promoting faith-based mentoring programs for ex-offenders

These efforts will help insure that more ex-offenders reenter a society that supports their success.

Resources

American Probation and Parole Association, <http://www.appa-net.org>

Association of State Correctional Administrators, <http://www.asca.net>

Invisible Punishment: The Collateral Consequences of Mass Imprisonment.

Edited by Marc Mauer, and Meda Chesney-Lind (2002). NY:New York Press.

National Alliance of Faith and Justice, <http://www.nafj-nabcj.org>

The Report of the Reentry Policy Council, <http://reentrypolicy.org./report-index.html>

Urban Institute, Reentry Roundtable, <http://www.urban.org/content/PolicyCenters/Justice/Projects/PrisonerReentry/Projects/projects.htm>

U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative, <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/reentry>

¹Charting the safe and successful return of prisoners to the community, *Report of the Reentry Policy Council*, January 2005.

²Rep. Rob Portman's introduction of The Second Chance Act of 2005, June 2004.

³Mosher J and Jernigan D (2001). Making the link: A public health approach to Preventing Alcohol-related Violence and Crime in *The Journal of Substance Abuse*, 2001:6 273-289.

⁴Hackbarth DP, Silvestri B, Casper W (1995). Tobacco and alcohol billboards in 50 Chicago neighborhoods: Market segmentation to sell dangerous products to the poor. *Journal of Public Health Policy*, 16(2):213-30.

⁵Gruenewald PJ, Millar A, and Treno A (1993). Alcohol availability and the ecology of drinking behavior. *Alcohol Health and Research World*, (17)1:39-45. Gruenewald PJ, Millar AB, and Roeper P (1996). Access to alcohol: geography and prevention for local communities. *Alcohol Health and Research World*, (20)4:244-251.

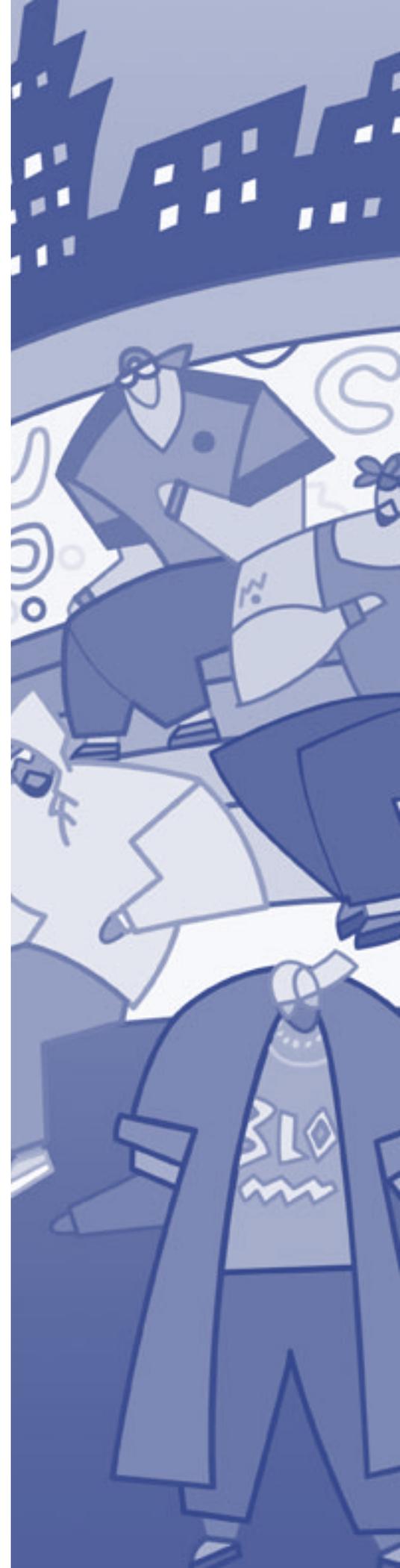
⁶Copple James E. (2003). Alcohol & violence: Can enhanced enforcement reduce the link?. *Current Perspectives on Violence Prevention*, Institute for the Study and Prevention of Violence, Kent State University Press.

⁷Scribner RA, MacKinnon DP, and Dwyer JH (1995). The risk of assaultive violence and alcohol availability in Los Angeles County, *American Journal of Public Health*, (85)3:335-340.

⁸Speer PW, Gorman DM, Labouvie EW, and Ontkush, MJ (1998). Violent crime and alcohol availability: relationships in an urban community. *Journal of Public Health Policy*, 19(3):303-318.

⁹Scribner R, Cohen D, Kaplan S, and Allen SH (1999). Alcohol availability and homicide in New Orleans: Conceptual considerations for small area analysis of the effect of alcohol outlet density. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, 60:310-316.

¹⁰Harford TC, Parker D, Paulter C, et al. (1979). Relationship between the number of on-premise outlets and alcoholism. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, 40(11):1053-1057.



America's Partners to Prevent Underage Drinking

Partners

American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators
www.aamva.org

The BARS Program
www.barsprogram.com

E-Seek, Inc.
www.e-seekinc.com

First Data Merchant Services
www.firstdatacorp.com

Intelli-Check, Inc.
www.intellicheck.com

International Institute for Alcohol Awareness

Leiweke Distribution Companies
www.idverificationsystem.com

National Liquor Law Enforcement Association
www.nllea.org

Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation
www.pire.org

Precision Dynamics Corporation
www.pdcorp.com

Scholastic, Inc.
www.scholastic.com

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www.BeAwareNow.org