

Reentry Programs: What Works and What Doesn't

We have already noted some of the difficulties of returning from prison to society. Reentry programs try to smooth this transition. As with all well-intentioned programs, some of these efforts succeed, and many fail.

The 2008 Federal Second Chance Act has made grant money available to government agencies and non-profit organizations that help returning citizens to avoid recidivism by creating new and successful lives for themselves.

But reentry can mean many things. These days, the term tends to refer to a specific, limited set of programs rooted in a particular ideological understanding of why returning citizens struggle.

The model in vogue since the 1970s begins with the assumption that returning citizens lack certain basic “life skills”—positive attitude, mainstream personal grooming and appearance, social skills,

interview skills—and that these deficits led to their earlier criminal acts. Reentry programs tend to focus on teaching

these skills in a series of short workshops, rather than investing in more expensive and more intensive educational programs. A person who fails to get a job, or who reenters prison, is understood to have failed, as a result of his or her personal shortcomings.⁴⁷¹

This approach ignores the “enormous structural obstacles that stand between ex-offenders and full economic, political, and social membership in the United States.”⁴⁷² These include all the barriers to reentry discussed on page __. As Marie Gottschalk bluntly quips, “Many former offenders never got a first chance, let alone a second one,”⁴⁷³ because of poor education, mental health problems, and structural changes in the economy that have predominantly affected

poor communities and communities of color.

Returning to the Camp⁴⁷⁴

In America today, one in one hundred people are living “outside the camp,” behind bars, in city, state and federal prisons... [Parashat Metzora] begins with a discussion of the rehabilitation of the [person with “leprosy,” who has been temporary exiled]. The community’s challenge is how to integrate this person upon his return. The integration proceeds in stages... By the end of the extensive and elaborate proceedings, the formerly stigmatized person is declared ritually pure. The Torah suggests that there are times when a community must protect itself by excluding from society those it deems dangerous. It also suggests that the stigma should last as long as necessary, but not longer. Restoring individuals to the dignity that is their birthright seems to be a concern, alongside protecting society from those who could harm it. When returning citizens are barred from jobs or required to share their criminal record with prospective employers, or when digital databases make that information easily accessible, a question of human rights emerges: When does society’s valid interest in protection come up against a person’s right to be a full and dignified member of society?

– Rabbi Nancy Fuchs Kreimer

⁴⁷¹ Gottschalk, p. 82

⁴⁷² Gottschalk, p. 80

⁴⁷³ Gottschalk, p. 81

⁴⁷⁴ <http://truah.org/resources-91356/divrei-torah/561-reintegration.html>

This is not at all to say that prison programming is unimportant—on the contrary. According to one report,

*There is no question that providing meaningful work, education, and self-development programs to prisoners promotes more human [sic.] and safer prisons. And a growing body of research...suggests that prisoners who seriously take advantage of well-administered rehabilitative services and complete the programs are more likely to succeed in achieving satisfying conventional lives after prison than persons who do not receive these services.*⁴⁷⁵



programs to improve their quality of life or their ability to contribute meaningfully to the community inside of prison.

If we really want to help returning citizens reintegrate into society, we must look beyond the individual to also address the larger structural problems that make reentry so

challenging. The following profiles offer pictures of three reentry programs that are succeeding.

Who's working on it?

- The Center for Returning Citizens (<http://trcrphilly.org/>)

But they must be the right programs. The authors go on to caution that “the danger of relying on treatment and programs to solve America’s imprisonment crisis is that when recidivism isn’t reduced, imprisonment will be regarded as the only viable answer to the crime problem.”⁴⁷⁶ Additionally, when prison programming focuses solely on reentry, people sentenced to life without parole or the death penalty—who are not expected to reenter society—may find themselves without

- Legal Action Center offers this guide to reentry disenfranchisement in your state:

<http://www.lac.org/roadblocks-to-reentry/main.php?view=law>

- The Brennan Center for Justice at NYU offer this U.S. map of voting disenfranchisement: <http://www.brennancenter.org/sites/default/files/analysis/RTV%20Map%2010%2016%2013.pdf>

⁴⁷⁵ <http://www.jfa-associates.com/publications/srs/UnlockingAmerica.pdf>, p. 17

⁴⁷⁶ <http://www.jfa-associates.com/publications/srs/UnlockingAmerica.pdf>, p. 15

What's Working

Ready4Work⁴⁷⁷

Operation New Hope's Ready4Work in Jacksonville, FL is a national leader in reentry programs. Since 1999, the program has found jobs for 2,500 returning citizens, 70% of whom were still in them a year after placement. Recidivism among participants stands at 15%, compared to the over 70% national average rate. Part of the success can be attributed to the partnerships Ready4Work develops with local businesses, though it must also be noted that the program does not take returning citizens who were convicted of violent or sexual crimes. Ready4Work begins with a 4-6 week career development course—a relatively long investment—and then follows clients for the first year, providing a case manager, job coach, and often a life coach. The cost for a year of services is approximately \$4,500, \$1,000 more than a year of probation but as much as one-tenth the cost of a year's incarceration.⁴⁷⁸

Center for Employment Opportunities⁴⁷⁹

Getting a job when you've been in prison, especially for a violent crime, can be nearly impossible. So the Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO)⁴⁸⁰, a reentry program in New York City, gives its clients their first job. After a week of training, clients are assigned to a 5-7 person team and get up to 75 days of temporary work, cleaning courtrooms and doing maintenance on city buildings. They also receive ongoing counseling and job-search assistance, and the work team functions as a support system. Sam Schaeffer, CEO's executive director, says the normalcy helps people adjust. "You're earning a daily paycheck, and all of a sudden you're getting on the subway, with that metro card that you couldn't afford two weeks ago and you're reading the paper, and you're sort of like, 'Yea, I can do this,'" he said. Charles Russel, who spent 25 years in prison for second-degree murder, being back at work after so long "is humbling. It keeps you out of trouble and gives you some money to eat with." CEO is part of a "Pay for Success" venture, in which private investors partner with government agencies to fund programs and create accountability. The initial benchmark for CEO's success was to reduce recidivism by 8% and increase employment by 5%. A 2012 review found that, in fact, recidivism was down by 16-22%.

Women's Prison Association

Meet Vivian, one of the women whose lives have been touched by the Women's Prison Association (WPA)⁴⁸¹. Founded in New York in 1845, WPA is the nation's oldest organization working with criminal justice-involved women. Today, it provides a variety of programs, from alternatives to incarceration to services for women in prison and jail to reentry programs. Vivian writes:

I grew up in the foster care system, and by my mid-20's, I had four children of my own. My life was never stable, and I started using drugs. I got sent to jail, and I lost my parental rights while I was locked up. When I got out, I found that the process of regaining custody of my children was even more difficult and painful than being incarcerated. In WPA, I had a coach and partner for the journey to reunify with my children. I moved into the Sarah Powell Huntington House [WPA's transitional residence for women reunifying with their children] and in less than a year, I won full custody of my children. I was so happy to have my children back, but being together was not easy. My children had been in foster care for two years; they were angry and hurt. WPA helped us to heal and to build a new, strong family bond. In 2006, I earned my BA in Social Science and am currently pursuing a Master's in Mental Health. I am most proud that all of my children are attending college. My journey to sobriety and parenting was tough, and WPA was there to assist me every step of the way.⁴⁸²

WPA enables its clients to succeed by looking at them as whole people and helping them with multiple needs, rather than focusing narrowly on job placement.

477 <http://operationnewhope.org/ready4work/>

478 https://www.doleta.gov/pri/pdf/mentoring_ex_prisoners_a_guide.pdf, p. 1.

479 <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/12/reducing-recidivism/421323/>

480 <http://ceoworks.org/>

481 <http://www.wpaonline.org/>

482 <http://www.wpaonline.org/about/success-stories/vivian>