Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

The Struggles of Reentry After Incarceration

Reed Maruyama · Wednesday, September 30th, 2020

In a time where much of America's population is incarcerated, successful reintegration of ex-convicts is not only important to those returning from incarceration, but it is also an economic necessity. Although reentry is important, the path back to a normal life after incarceration can be extremely difficult.

According to the U.S. Department of Justice, 10,000 prisoners are released from America's state and federal prisons each week. That adds up to more than 650,000 ex-convicts annually attempting to reintegrate into society.

Although the numbers of released prisoners are high, recidivism rates cut down on the amount of those ex-convicts who successfully reintegrate. According to the Recidivism Center, about two-thirds of ex-convicts are rearrested within three years of release.

Those rates are high because of the struggles ex-convicts must face when trying to successfully reintegrate. Writer and substance abuse counselor, Patrick O'Neil remembers his first days of reentry as the hardest part of the process. "I was given $200 'gate money' and a bus ride into San Francisco," O'Neil said. "I had nowhere to go and the state didn't provide any housing or resources for anything. After basically being locked away from society for almost two years I was suddenly thrust into a crowded downtown during the rush hour morning commute and my senses were on overload."

Ex-convicts must quickly center themselves and keep in touch with their parole officer in order to refrain from absconding—having their whereabouts unknown—which could land them back in prison. With a considerable amount of responsibility and a lack of resources, ex-convicts can be easily overwhelmed and can turn back to the habits which got them into jail in the first place.

"I did report that morning and my parole officer told me to get a job and a place to live or he'd violate me but offered no help with either," O'Neil said. "I had been a drug addict for most of my adult life prior to being convicted and my normal response to feeling overwhelmed and uncomfortable was to self medicate using heroin…but I knew where that would lead."

Ex-convicts must try to get jobs in order to provide themselves with food and housing. But, when applying for jobs, they must inform their prospective bosses that they were formerly incarcerated which can cause great difficulties when trying to get hired.

"Next to actually being incarcerated, applying for a job with a record is right up there as some of

the worst moments of my life," O'Neil said. "Branded an ex-con I already felt that I wasn't a part of society, and now here was more unwanted scrutiny and irrefutable proof confirming how badly I already thought about myself. Back then I had two choices, check the 'have you ever been arrested' box and not get hired, or lie and forever be in fear my record would eventually be discovered and I'd be fired for dishonesty."

Many ex-convicts attribute their struggles to a lack of resources to help them successfully reintegrate. Some organizations, however, do exist in order to help ex-convicts with their reentry process. Reentry programs and pathways are offered in order to help people ease back into a routine of life after incarceration.

These corporations, such as Homeboy Industries, embrace ex-convicts and work hard to create jobs and careers that will get them back into the community. Homeboy is the largest gang rehabilitation center in Los Angeles County. According to a study from the University of California Los Angeles, six out of 10 gang members who go to Homeboy Industries are able to integrate back into society successfully and stay away from gang violence.

Homeboy provides a variety of free programs to high-risk youths which include GED classes, mental health counseling, job training, and legal services. Branded with their motto, "Nothing stops a bullet like a job," Homeboy counsels and cares for many ex-convicts and provides them with jobs and support that will keep them on their feet and away from the streets.

Former gang member, Rafael Jimenez expressed his gratitude for Homeboy in an article for CNN. "I knew if I [stayed in a gang], I would be dead or in jail," Jimenez said. "I can't believe I wasted all that time. And now, I'm baking pastries with rivals that I never would've spoken to just last year."

Attaining a job is extremely hard but extremely beneficial to ex-convicts. Without a job, ex-convicts are likely to fall back into old and dangerous habits which might cause them to end up back in jail.

Fabián Debora, who started out as a baker for Homeboy, spoke about the benefits of being employed after incarcerationin an article for CNN. "When a person has a reason to wake up in the morning and come to work…they're already on a path for change," Debora said. "It feels good coming back from a long day at work and just staying home. When I'm not at the bakery, I'm playing with my son, memorizing recipes, studying for my GED, reading, and I even go to my sister's church on Sundays. Things are better."

Despite the programs which can help an ex-convict with reentry, getting back into normal life is extremely difficult with the stigma and lack of resources that ex-convicts have to deal with. Previous bad habits can be comforting to fall back on but they can also lead to an ex-convict landing themselves back in prison.

"Stay away from the people, places, and things… essentially everything that was your former life," O'Neil said. "Don't give up. Don't fall back into whatever you were doing that got you sent to prison. Do something to better yourself. Be of service to others. Walk the straight and narrow and get off parole/probation."

Patrick O'Neil is now helping formerly incarcerated people through the restorative justice organization REDEEMED, which you can learn more about here: https://www.redeemedproject.org/

VOTE!

This entry was posted on Wednesday, September 30th, 2020 at 2:30 pm and is filed under Discourse
You can follow any responses to this entry through the Comments (RSS) feed. You can skip to the end and leave a response. Pinging is currently not allowed.