



## The Dawn of a New Movement

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April 24, 2006 issue - Every movement has its seminal moment—when an insight patently obvious in retrospect begins to come clearly into focus. Prisoner re-entry guru Jeremy Travis places his moment in 1999. He was then director of the National Institute of Justice, and his boss, Attorney General Janet Reno, asked a simple question: "What are we doing about all the people coming out of prison?"

No one had a clue. The search for answers subsequently spawned a host of initiatives that may fundamentally alter how society deals with people who have served time. The issue is hardly trivial. On any given day, America locks down some 2.3 million people. And almost all eventually get out. Some 656,000 or so emerge every year; about two thirds of them end up behind bars again.

Edward Davis, the top cop in Lowell, Mass., found that scenario profoundly disturbing and resolved to try to change it—at least for Lowell, which "hit the skids," he says, in the mid-'90s. Crime had risen dramatically, and Davis saw no prospect of "locking-up our way out of the problem." So the police department adopted a new approach—which entailed visiting each prisoner upon his or her release. The cops delivered a two-part message. One was a warning ("We are watching you") and the other an offer to connect ex-prisoners with services to help them get on their feet. Lowell has since seen a 60 percent drop in serious crimes.

Connecticut state Rep. William Dyson had a similar epiphany. As Appropriations Committee chair in the state House, he saw how expensive and wasteful it was to warehouse people. Also, his son had served hard time, which gave Dyson a real understanding of the barriers to re-entry.

Prisoners generally lose all forms of identification while inside, which cripples their ability to function outside. When released, they are prohibited from associating with other felons, so those with relatives with records often cannot go home. They are essentially barred from certain professions, and from receiving food stamps, housing subsidies and certain school loans. They, in short, enter "a kind of neverland that encourages them to go back to doing what they were doing," Dyson says.

Dyson and staffer Andrew Clark incorporated "justice reinvestment" ideas into a bill aimed at reducing prison overcrowding. After the legislation passed in 2004, Connecticut transferred \$13.4 million from the budget for housing prisoners out of state into a range of programs and activities aimed at reducing recidivism.

There is "a buzz about [re-entry]," says Travis, who is now president of John Jay College of Criminal Justice. Boston, Chicago and San Francisco recently implemented measures to reduce discrimination against former inmates. The re-entry bug has even bitten President George W. Bush, who proposed an initiative in his 2004 State of the Union address. A so-called Second Chance Act introduced in the Senate by Judiciary chair Arlen Specter is working its way through Congress. Along with Democrats, such Republicans as Sam Brownback, Jon Kyl and Rick Santorum have signed on as cosponsors.

As Nancy Levigne of the Urban Institute notes, many of the ideas called "re-entry" used to be called "rehabilitation." But rehabilitation became "a dirty word to most Republicans," which led to cutbacks in educational opportunities and virtually every other humanizing influence in prison. " 'Re-entry' doesn't sound soft on crime," says Levigne.

One limitation of the new approach is that it typically ignores prisoners when they are actually behind bars. "Saying we don't have to address these issues on the inside but [can] address them when they come out is ridiculous," says Glenn Martin of the National HIRE Network. Another limitation is that it doesn't address policy decisions that have led this nation to send so many young people to prison in the first place. "I'm fairly pessimistic the mass imprisonment we see now in poor urban communities really has much prospect of being reversed," observes Bruce Western, author of the forthcoming "Punishment and Inequality in America."

Western is happy re-entry is coming into its own, but thinks something grander is needed. He is no doubt correct. But the notion nonetheless represents real progress—and a noteworthy advance in the thinking of political leaders who deluded themselves for so long into believing that it was cheaper to lock people up than to help them stay out of trouble.

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