

# Prisoner Reintegration Challenges of Assimilation and Crime Desistance

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This paper illuminates and offers recommendations from a symbolic interactionist's perspective to the challenges associated with assimilation and crime desistance. Symbolic interactionists perceive offenders to be pragmatic actors who continuously adjust their behaviors and actions to the response and reaction of others. Change cannot occur unless the offender chooses to adapt to society's norms, values, and laws through the adoption of socially responsible behaviors. Thus, genuine rehabilitation must begin with the prisoners' willingness and motivation to undergo a process of self-transformation. However, the social, medical, emotional, and legal challenges ex-prisoners face stifle their willingness and ability to prepare adequately for reentry and to refrain from recidivistic behaviors. This writer advocates for outcomes-based therapeutic programming during and following incarceration to increase success of prisoner assimilation and reduce recidivism rates.

Confronted with uncertainty, animosity, and a multitude of personal, social, and legal barriers, most prisoners reenter what they perceive to be an antagonistic society with a defeatist attitude. If not addressed, this attitude will likely lead to reintegration failure. The process of "going straight," which criminologists refer to as desistance from crime, is multi-faceted yet attainable if the offender willingly transforms his or her self-image and lifestyle to one that receives mainstream society's approval. The onus is, therefore, on the offender to embrace change and self-transformation.

Annually more than 630,000 state and federal prisoners make the routine journey from prison to the community compared with the roughly 150,000 prisoners that made the same trek 30 years ago (Travis, 2005). That figure equates to the release of approximately 1,700 state and federal prisoners on any given day (Travis, 2005). This is in addition to the nearly 12 million individuals who annually report to and are eventually released from jail each year (Lyman & LoBuglio, 2006). According to Lyman and LoBuglio (2006), the average daily population of jail inmates is approximately 750,000 and mounting with each passing year.

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According to Travis (2005), 93% of individuals sentenced to state and federal prisons will eventually return to the community at some point in the future, whether it is tomorrow or 30 years from tomorrow. Only a mere 7% of all prisoners are serving death sentences or life without the possibility of parole, and an even smaller portion of prisoners, roughly 3,000, die in prison annually (Petersilia, 2005). To compound matters, approximately one fifth of the 630,000 prisoners discharged to the community each year are released unconditionally (Travis, 2005). These individuals are under no legal duty or responsibility whatsoever to adhere to or abide by any special conditions characteristically linked to parole, simply because they have been released from state and federal correctional institutions that have adopted determinate sentencing systems in place of indeterminate sentencing systems (Travis, 2005).

With little to no preparation for reentry or community supervision once released from prison, the overwhelming majority of those who enter prison eventually leave prison with the same underlying personal and social problems that most likely contributed to, whether directly or indirectly, the prisoners' initial troubles. With determinate sentencing (a fixed term), prisons and prisoners have little incentive to participate in programs to help prisoners better themselves. Concerns about costs have diminished public support for prison-based programs, and the subsequent reduction in these programs has resulted in more tax increases to fund prison construction and operation costs and has amplified public safety concerns (Travis, 2005).

Consequently, the ex-prisoners' social, medical, and legal problems will have likely worsened due to the present state of incarceration and parole in America. Therefore, the impending plight of hundreds of thousands of prisoners rests in the hands of social science researchers, corrections' officials, policymakers, and members of the community at large to remedy a social problem with a merciless ripple effect. If not addressed, the challenges associated with prisoner reintegration will only worsen over time. In short, the current practice of prisoner reintegration stimulates and perpetuates existing social problems among ex-prisoners and within certain communities, thereby generating considerable social, medical, economic, and legal difficulties society is largely unprepared to handle and remedy (Urban Institute Justice Policy Center, 2006). Simply stated, this writer's primary focus is the prisoner's need for self-transformation to reduce rising recidivism rates and stop what many perceive to be an endless cycle of criminality.

For successful reintegration, the individual offender must adapt and transform, which requires that the offender adopt socially responsible attitudes, values, and beliefs. The offender must, therefore, change his or her thinking and behaving and "unlearn" the criminal ways that led to the offender's troubles in favor of learning socially responsible behaviors and actions. The offender can accomplish this goal only if he or she willingly

engages in an ongoing self-transformation process, which should theoretically start from the time he or she first enters prison.

### **Writer's Position on Reducing Recidivism**

The criminal justice system's lack of attention and failure to support or teach this process, in this writer's opinion, is the primary crux of the recidivism problem. Therefore, this writer's position is that therapeutic programming within and outside of the prison can be effective only if the offender embraces change. The onus is, therefore, on the offender to focus on the immediate problem, deal with it, and then move on to the next challenge. This requires that the offender constantly re-think and re-examine every action (Rollo, 2002b). Ex-offenders' reintegration will be more successful if they fully expect daily life after prison to be challenging and at times downright demanding (Rollo, 2002b).

To prepare effectively for community reentry, offenders must embrace the internal and external changes necessary for successful assimilation. Success, according to Rollo (2002b), demands ability to adapt and adjust quickly and effectively to new ways of thinking and acting. One must not fear change but rather embrace change. Rollo (2002b) recommends that offenders use every single day, both during and following captivity, for positive, consistent preparation and growth, altering the way they think, act, and behave to conform to society's norms, laws, and values. Criminologists refer to this practice as the "desistance process," which entails changing and replacing one's criminal ways in favor of socially responsible behaviors and actions. The desistance process of "going straight" is attainable as long as the offender's self-perception no longer mirrors how the offender believes others perceive him or her, particularly in regard to labeling and other forms of social stigma. Then and only then will the offender's core criminal self be replaced with a socially responsible self whose behaviors and actions reflect the values, beliefs, and norms of the larger dominant culture.

### **Self-Change Is the Key to Successful Reintegration**

Rollo offers inmates facing release the following secrets of success (2002b, 1–3) :

- Do not fear change, do not live in the past, but rather live in the present and embrace change;
- Prepare to adapt to a world outside of prison that may be cruel, unwelcoming, unforgiving, and unwilling to forget past misdeeds;
- Discard old ways of thinking and doing by accepting that self-honesty and courage are absolutely essential character traits;
- Refuse to surrender by maintaining control over emotions;

- Be prepared for the triggers that often lead to relapse, particularly because dependency is one of the strongest predictors of re-incarceration;
- Constantly think, re-think, examine, and re-examine every situation before acting;
- Always strive for self-improvement because it is an endless process;
- Focus on positive relationship building, and accept that trust and respect will not occur immediately but over time;
- Be prepared to handle fear, anxiety, uncertainty, stress, and other hardships by remaining confident and determined;
- Redefine yourself and accept that society does not owe you, but rather that you owe society;
- Establish short-range and long-range goals, but ensure that both are realistic and attainable;
- Your criminal past is forever a part of yourself—accept it and move forward not backward;
- Maintain faith and recognize that everything in life must be earned;
- Accept that success is possible and within your grasp, but change must come from within.

### **Counterarguments for Treatment**

Granted, a program that promotes offenders' willingness and motivation to transform their criminal ways into a social scripture that welcomes and embraces obedience and adherence to the law is not without its critics. After all, treatment policies and practices have largely failed to deliver the promise of reducing recidivism among ex-convicts. Even this writer is somewhat skeptical because criminal offenders, as a group, are notorious for being deceptive and manipulative. Case in point: a prisoner's participation in prison programming is a sure way to get positive attention from an empathetic parole board that yearns to see encouraging outcome-based results. But are the programs effective, or are the programs' participants simply "playing the game" to gain the support and confidence of the parole board? Most critics would agree that motivation and change are truly difficult to measure empirically. Moreover, it is even more difficult to determine whether change actually occurred after completing said therapeutic programs.

For that reason, this writer is not surprised by the nearly three-decades-old shift in correctional thinking and practice from treatment to punishment. Violent crime, fueled mainly by the 1980's illicit drug wars, had continued to mount with record-number murders taking place throughout the nation. Americans looked to politicians for answers. Legislators responded by drafting punitive legislation that called for mandatory minimum sentences, truth-in-sentencing laws, and the controversial "three strikes and you're out"

legislation (Travis, 2005). In theory, the aforementioned crime-control measures are well-intentioned legal concepts; however, collectively, all three have caused considerable, unanticipated problems for ex-prisoners, communities, and the nation as a whole.

This writer suggests that prison and community-based treatment programs model the best practices the U. S. Department of Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) outlines. SAMHSA has produced a series of evidence-based guides as part of their *Treatment Improvement Protocol (TIP) Series*. TIP 35, for example, is titled "Enhancing motivation for change in substance abuse treatment (SAMHSA, 1999)." This writer, as the executive director of a licensed nonprofit drug and alcohol outpatient facility in Pennsylvania, strongly disagrees with those who claim that treatment does not work. The SAMHSA research supports this writer's position that treatment is effective in influencing change but acknowledges that increasing the offender's commitment to change must start with enhancing the offender's decision-making capabilities (SAMHSA, 1999).

The process of eliciting and exploring motivation to succeed includes open-ended questioning and reflective listening that is largely designed to help offenders connect with extrinsic (external) and intrinsic (internal) motivators to enhance decision-making and commitment to change. The emphasis is on personal choice and responsibility. Self-efficacy is, therefore, a critical determinant of behavioral change (SAMHSA, 1999). The incorporation of these motivational approaches and interventions into treatment programs may be a practical and effective response to many of the challenges correctional officials and community-based providers who work closely with ex-offenders face.

### **Mass Incarceration: A Measure in Crime Reduction?**

There is no denying that Americans live in an era of "mass incarceration," a term penologists and criminologists use to describe the unrestrained use of prisons as society's retort to crime (Travis, 2005). This largely punitive reaction to the crime problem in America has resulted in the greatest social experiment in American history, according to Travis (2005); however, this social experiment, originally intended to reduce crime, has failed miserably. Such actions have, conversely, led to the emergence of far more social problems than in previous decades rather than fewer. What most do not know or refuse to accept is that this shift in both ideology and practice from treatment to punishment has caused a number of unintended problems this nation was unprepared for and must now remedy.

America's shortsighted response to crime control has resulted in a literal prison boom that annually costs America in excess of \$40 billion (Travis, 2005). This cost is for correctional expenditures alone and does not account for the costs associated with law

enforcement and the courts. To illustrate this point, approximately 200,000 Americans were incarcerated in 1973; yet by 2003, this figure jumped to 1.4 million. If one were to factor jail inmates into this calculation, the per capita rate of imprisonment raises to 700 per 100,000, making the United States the global leader in incarceration (Travis, 2005).

This prison explosion has had the most significant effect on lower-income African-Americans and other racial and ethnic minority groups. For instance, the lifetime likelihood of an African-American male being sentenced to prison is 1 in 3 compared with Caucasian males who have a 1 in 17 chance of serving time in prison (Petersilia, 2003). The abolishment of parole and the imprudent shift from indeterminate sentencing to determinate sentencing has done little to reduce recidivism rates; however, the nation has done very little to rectify the recidivism problem. It would behoove American society to reinstate and maintain indeterminate sentencing and a parole system that has historically provided support, guidance, and enforcement, which, in this writer's opinion, significantly raises the ex-prisoner's probability of success in the outside world.

### **Challenges Associated With Prisoner Reentry—A Brief Summary**

Proponents of the conservative, "get tough" on crime measures, particularly those who advocate the widespread use of prisons as punishment, have all but forgotten one important factor: they all come home. Only a small fraction of those sentenced to prison remain in prison until death. As mentioned, roughly 93% will reenter and re-assimilate back into the community at some point. It has been well documented that the educational level, work experiences, and social skills of prisoners are deficient and well-below national averages of those in the general population (Lawrence, Mears, Dubin, & Travis, 2002). These deficiencies contribute consistently to a cycle of unemployment that increases the likelihood of future recidivistic criminal behaviors and the intergenerational cycle of criminality for the offenders' children and siblings (Lawrence et al., 2002). When compounded with family troubles, housing issues, substance abuse dependency, and a community that is unreceptive to the ex-prisoner's plight, the probability of recidivism and eventual re-incarceration increases considerably.

#### *Employment*

According to the United States Bureau of Justice Statistics, one third of all prisoners were unemployed at the time of arrest (Petersilia, 2005). Moreover, a shockingly low percentage of prisoners have viable, marketable job skills or sufficient literacy to obtain and maintain gainful employment for extended periods (Petersilia, 2003). To complicate matters further, ex-prisoners face the society-wide stigma of being an ex-convict, which severely limits the number of job opportunities available to the nearly 630,000 prisoners

released each year. While obtaining and maintaining lawful employment is essential to the ex-prisoners' rehabilitation, the availability of the Internet and other sophisticated technology has given employers relatively easy access to criminal history records on prospective employees. As a result, many ex-prisoners are denied employment and, regrettably, limited to mostly low-wage employment opportunities that make it incredibly difficult, but not impossible, to support themselves and their family.

In addition to accepting that such stigma exists and that respect is earned and forgiveness for one's past wrongdoing is unlikely, ex-offenders can do much to change the perception of others by abstaining from crime, substance abuse, and other problematic behaviors. The offender can break the cycle of criminality only by willingly changing his or her unlawful ways.

It should also be noted that any attempt to improve the employment outcomes of ex-prisoners must also address the individual's physical, mental, and substance abuse needs, which hamper the ex-prisoner's ability to garner and maintain steady employment (Solomon, Dedel-Johnson, Travis, & McBridel, 2004). Relapsing to drugs and alcohol use has a profound influence on the ex-prisoners' ability to remain in the community. In this writer's experience, many are remanded back to prison for a technical parole violation (i.e., dirty urine), or they engage in a "new" crime while under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

### *Education*

Nationally, fewer than 60% of all prisoners have a high school diploma or GED compared with 85% of the adult general population (Petersilia, 2005). According to Petersilia, 11% of prisoners have a documented learning disability compared with only 3% of the adult general population (2005). To compound matters, only one third of all prisoners participate in any type of educational programming while incarcerated, including those specific classes that focus on GED preparation, adult basic education, and learning English as a second language (Petersilia, 2005).

### *Physical and Mental Health*

More than three quarters of prisoners released annually have an extensive history of substance dependency, 16% have a debilitating mental condition, and the number of prisoners who are HIV positive or have AIDS is five times greater than that of the general population (Petersilia, 2003). In a recent study, 40% of study participants reported having a number of serious physical ailments that have had an adverse affect on an already strained U.S. health care system (Petersilia, 2003). For example, a 1997 Urban Institute study revealed that nearly 26% of the nation's prisoners were infected with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, nearly 16% were infected with the Hepatitis B virus, roughly 32% were

infected with Hepatitis C, and approximately 38% had contracted tuberculosis (Travis, Solomon, & Waul, 2001). Collectively, these percentages suggest that the infection rates for prisoners and ex-prisoners are five to ten times greater than that of the general population. Reintegration of these individuals into society further burdens the health care system by increasing healthcare costs and potentially jeopardizes the health and well-being of community members with whom they come in direct contact (Travis et al., 2001). The prevalence of mental illness among inhabitants of the nation's correctional system is staggering since the deinstitutionalization movement of the 1960s (Travis, 2005).

### *Substance Abuse*

Although statistics vary, upward of 80% of the nation's prisoners have an extensive history of alcohol and drug abuse, and many are classified as poly-drug abusers who abuse and are dependent on more than one drug. Of those with a documented history of drug abuse, more than one quarter are intravenous drug users (Petersilia, 2005). According to Petersilia (2005), less than one third of those preparing to reenter society received substance abuse treatment while incarcerated. Even when substance abuse programming is available, only about 10% of those with an addiction to drugs or alcohol take advantage of such programming. Virtually every research study to date has shown an exceptionally strong correlation between substance abuse and dependency and recidivism. For example, one study showed that 33% percent of recently released prisoners reported some type of substance use or intoxication during the first three months of release (Visher, Kachinowski, La Vigne, & Travis, 2004).

The research has shown consistently that prisoners who participate in treatment programs for substance abuse are less likely to reoffend on release in comparison with those who did not participate in such programs (Solomon, Dedel-Johnson, Travis, & McBride, 2004). The two treatment modalities that have been found to have the most positive effects are cognitive behavioral interventions and in-prison therapeutic communities (Travis et al., 2001). Collectively, these programs assume that criminal behavior is learned; therefore, prisoners can unlearn such behaviors by focusing on their interpersonal coping skills and ability to adapt to the outside world and by receiving help abstaining from drugs and alcohol. Internal prison therapeutic communities are appreciably more effective when coupled with and followed by community-based aftercare programs (Travis et al., 2001).

### *Lack of Treatment Programs and Other Social Support Systems*

Closing the gap in programming between prison and the community is critical to the offender's successful reintegration, in this writer's opinion, because it provides for and

maintains the continuum of care that ex-offenders desperately need and require to live a crime-free lifestyle. There is an obvious deficiency in effective social service support systems at the state and federal level, but such support is virtually nonexistent at the local level, particularly in those neighborhoods deemed the most disadvantaged, yet home to a large majority of the nation's returning prisoners.

As a former prison administrator, this writer considers treatment programming within much of the nation's prisons to be inadequate. More important, the prison environment is far from therapeutic. Negative attitudes prevail, and anyone who has ever been in a prison as either an inmate or officer knows this to be true. The desire to change is diminished when one is surrounded by such pessimism. Survival within prison depends on adapting to an environment in which trickery, disloyalty, and violence are not only condoned but encouraged. The phrase "survival of the fittest" is appropriate because to survive, one must exhibit virility and refrain from showing any type of physical or emotional weakness. The prison environment is not conducive to treatment, especially when security and safety concerns and costs take precedence over any type of rehabilitative programming.

Moreover, there is widespread resistance and reluctance to provide such services for ex-offenders among the large majority of community members. It is ironic that the American public voices concerns and interest in helping ex-offenders abstain from drugs and alcohol and otherwise live a socially responsible lifestyle, but very few are willing to offer assistance. This alienation and absence of social connectedness community members foster can have a profound effect on the ex-prisoners' likelihood of success in the community. An offender's ability to cope with such alienation by learning self-survival tactics and strategies to combat or deal with an antagonistic community is a measure of his or her success. Rollo (2004) strongly recommends that soon-to-be-released prisoners confront the harsh fact that society expects them to fail, and they must prepare to confront these social and legal barriers by forging ahead. The determination to succeed when all expect you to fail can deter even the most motivated ex-offender.

### *Housing*

Most prisoners return to the same disadvantaged communities they left and are once again confined to low-income public housing that may be submerged in drug and gang activity, which has been linked repeatedly to interpersonal violence and other self-destructive behaviors. Private housing is not an option because ex-prisoners are exclusively barred from the private housing market. Even the public housing market can and has banned ex-prisoners from renting or leasing an apartment, especially if the criminal conviction was drug-related, a sexual offense, or a crime of violence as outlined in the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's exclusionary policies (Travis et al., 2001).

## **Desistance and the Self-Transformation Process**

Desistance is essentially the start of the criminal offenders' self-transformation process. Lawrence, Mears, Dubin, and Travis (2002) offer the following principles of effective intervention in the offender's desistance process: help the offender acquire those job skills applicable to the employment market; match prison program offerings to the offender's needs; create programs that target the offender's need to change attitudes, beliefs, and values and engage in pro-social activities; provide programs that are well integrated with other prison programs to avoid unnecessary redundancy; ensure that program participation is timed close to the offender's presumed release date; ensure that the offender participates actively in such programming for several months; ensure that quality community-based programming follows prison programming immediately; rely on effective program design, implementation, and monitoring; and involve sociological researchers in programs as evaluators.

### *Efficient and Effective Prison Programming: The Blueprint for Change*

Reintegration preparation must begin at the intake stage with a risk and needs assessment shortly after the prisoner enters the correctional system (Shaughnessy, 2007). From there, corrections officials must measure the prisoner's motivation and desire to participate in quality treatment programs, an assessment that is based more on the evaluator's experience than science (Shaughnessy, 2007). Quality prison treatment programs have been shown to reduce offender recidivism by 10% to 15% (Shaughnessy, 2007). This percentage does not appear to be statistically significant at first glance, but even these rates can produce considerable cost savings and improve public safety (Shaughnessy, 2007).

## **Recommendations**

### *Reinvest in Prison Treatment Programs*

Society must reinvest in quality prison treatment programs that have proved effective in reducing recidivism. An effective program assists the offender in changing his or her values, attitudes, and beliefs and in coping effectively with society's perceptions. Ridding oneself of the "us" versus "them" mentality is paramount. Offenders must learn to accept and embrace an attitude that, according to Rollo (2003), refuses to surrender to criminality. The prisoner must create and welcome a new, socially responsible identity and employ determination and perseverance to stay clean, sober, and crime-free. The offender must replace maladaptive thinking, which is largely self-destructive, with socially suitable, adaptive thinking, which enables the offender to accept full responsibility and be accountable for his or her behaviors and actions (Rollo, 2003).

To be truly successful in reducing recidivism, society must undergo another shift in thinking and practice. In other words, the pendulum must swing from relying on punishment to reduce crime back to treatment to reduce crime. According to Rollo (2003), less than 5% of every correctional dollar is spent on human development for prisoners. As a result, millions of prisoners have entered and exited the prison system only to return to prison as repeat offenders. The impetus for change must begin with programs that help enhance and enrich the prisoner's willingness and ability to change. These programs must start in the prison and continue once the offender re-enters the community.

As mentioned, it is vital to close the gap that exists in programming when the offender leaves prison and re-enters the community. It is crucial that prison and community-based programs work together and harmoniously by promoting and encouraging social responsibility and accountability. Because change must occur from within the individual for any program to be truly effective in reducing recidivism, prisoner programs must be practical and effective in helping prisoners find the reasons and means to care about themselves and define their new role in the community (Rollo, 2002).

#### *Efficient and Effective Community-Based Programming*

According to the Urban Institute, the cycle of arrest, removal, incarceration, and reentry is four times higher than it was two decades ago (2005). Strikingly, this continuous recycling of offenders has acutely affected only a relatively small number of communities over the past decade. The fact is that while an increasing number of prisoners return to major metropolitan cities within the United States, these ex-offenders are settling into a select few neighborhoods within these cities. Why is this fact important? Because these neighborhoods are often unable to provide the necessary support and services needed for successful prisoner reintegration because they are economically challenged, socially disadvantaged, and, to a large extent, disorganized (Urban Institute, 2005).

These communities need the most support to curb the cycle of criminality among offenders, and such services can provide for the betterment of the communities' overall safety and well-being. There is no denying that arrests, removal, incarceration, and reentry affect the community's well-being and may be responsible for fueling the intergenerational cycle of crime in these neighborhoods (Urban Institute, 2005). According to Du Bois and Berg (2002), sociologists must search for resources to implant within the community that will deter crime. (Moreover, sociologists want specific resources that will increase the probability that ex-prisoners will abstain from crime: sociologists are interested in finding the reason why some people living in high crime areas do not resort to crime.) The Urban Institute has established the Reentry Mapping Network (RMN) to collaborate with community-based organizations to foster change through the mapping

and analysis of neighborhood-level data (Urban Institute, 2005). The purpose of mapping is to understand and address prisoner reentry at the community level. But while ex-prisoners must be connected to resources that meet their needs and help them navigate through difficult circumstances now and in the future, it is largely incumbent on the offender to cope with life's stressors (Du Bois & Berg, 2002).

### *Family and Peer Support*

Positive relationship building and maintenance within one's family is indisputably critical to the ex-prisoner's transition and eventual success in mainstream society. According to Travis, Cincotta-McBride, and Solomon (2005), most prisoners feel that family support is a significant factor in reducing or preventing recidivism altogether. Families can also assist with housing, provide emotional support, serve as financial resources, and generally provide stability; therefore, it is important to regain and strengthen family ties as soon as the convicted offender enters prison, rather than waiting until the prisoner's release (Visher, Kachinowski, et al., 2004). Nearly 1 million incarcerated adults are the parents of minor children; however, the incarcerated parents are often separated from the children by an average of 160 miles, which further strains the parent-child relationship (Travis et al., 2005). Keeping prisoners close to home so family members can visit will likely have a positive effect on the offender and the offender's family and, more important, help to facilitate self-change.

Children of incarcerated parents often experience feelings of abandonment and loss, which can have profound consequences in feelings of shame, and in social stigma, weakened ties to family, poor school performance, increased delinquency, and increased risk of abuse or neglect. Moreover, these children are often cared for by extended family or the foster care system, which can perpetuate existing anger and resentment toward the incarcerated parent (Travis et al, 2005). The literature, although limited, suggests that the long-term effects of incarceration can, and most likely do, contribute negatively to intergenerational patterns of criminal behavior, advancing the cycle of self-destructive behaviors for both parent and child (Travis et al, 2005). To break the cycle of criminality, it is important to reestablish the ties that have been weakened or severed by the incarcerated adult's prison sentence, which may also help motivate criminal desistance. However, the onus is on the ex-prisoner to re-establish ties and make amends to those persons affected by the ex-prisoner's past lifestyle. Research indicates that offenders' attitudes affect their ability to reunite with family and friends within the community, and those prisoners with high levels of motivation to change are more likely to succeed in building relationships (Visher et al., 2004).

### *The Clinical Sociologist as a Change Agent*

From a symbolic interactionist's perspective, individuals internalize the ideas, understandings, beliefs, norms, and values of a social group. Their "membership" in that social group subsequently defines how society perceives them as individuals (Robinette & Straus, 2002). An individual's self-image is essentially a reflection of how that individual imagines others view him or her (Robinette & Straus, 2002). The clinical sociologist plays a crucial role as an agent of change by assisting prisoners in adopting attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors that are associated with socially responsible lifestyles. While rehabilitation is the absence of criminal behavior, true rehabilitation must begin with the prisoner's willingness and motivation to change.

### *Erasing the "Us" Versus "Them" Mentality*

The Looking Glass Self theory implies that one's self-image is formed both consciously and subconsciously by the perceived views and judgments of others (Yeung & Martin, 2003). Therefore, successful prisoner reintegration demands that ex-prisoners have the ability to adapt and exhibit socially acceptable and responsible behaviors that include thinking and acting appropriately and accordingly within society. It is essential that they rid themselves of the self-defeating "us" versus "them" mentality by focusing on positive relationship building with family and community members (Rollo, 2002b).

According to Rollo (2004), prisoners internalize hostility, belligerence, and resentment toward society, which ultimately leads to an individual who becomes negative, dangerous, and unstable and exhibits self-defeating behavior. Therefore, it is critical that researchers understand the deep influence incarceration has on the human mind and spirit (Rollo, 2004). Also as a society, it is imperative that we understand the effects of isolationism and alienation. When an individual loses the perception of having a vested interest and link to others the resulting sense of detachment and lack of connectedness limits the offender's sense of responsibility to others, which widens the social distance or dissonance exhibited in criminal behavior.

As a survival mechanism, prisoners create a parallel reality—Rollo (1998) refers to this practice as "reality bending"—which enables them to cope with and survive in an intensely hostile prison environment. If their reality bending is not addressed, many will become trapped in a spiraling cycle of blind rage, resistance, isolation, and despair, which will significantly impede any chance of successful reintegration into the community. Therefore, it is imperative that researchers devise ways to reverse the downward spiral of those who fall captive to the powerful effects of alienation and isolationism (Rollo, 1998). Expunging one's criminal records after a predetermined period of time, for example, would

provide hope and give the offender the sense that society is willing to forgive and forget past misdeeds.

### *The De-Labeling Process: Erasing the Stigma of Criminal Offender*

Change must also occur in the way society perceives those who violated the trust of the American people by breaking the law. Understandably, forgiveness is a difficult character trait to instill in others. Then again, society is partly responsible for criminal acts, because in an ideal society, considerable money would be invested in widespread crime prevention programs that are, by most accounts, far more effective in preventing crime than “treating” crime after the fact. It is, however, unlikely that the United States will move in that direction, at least in the foreseeable future, based on the nation’s historical approaches to crime and criminality and the conservative vacuum in which this nation finds itself (Petersilia, 2003).

But society can help restore the offender’s identity by erasing the social stigma associated with being an “ex-prisoner.” Labeling theory essentially states that society labels certain behaviors and actions as criminal, but once sanctioned for the delinquent or criminal act, the offender is permanently labeled by society (Schmallegger, 2006). Once labeled as a criminal, the individual has few legitimate opportunities to reintegrate successfully back into society. This individual will seek out others with the similar label of social misfit and resort to crime because the offender has identified and internalized the label society has bestowed (Schmallegger, 2006), and the result is more crime not less. According to labeling theorists, the blame lies partly with society because society created the label; yet, the individual eventually comes to identify with and accept the label (Schmallegger, 2006). Restoring the offender’s identity requires society to re-label the ex-prisoner with a positive, socially acceptable label.

## **Conclusion**

### *Shifting the Paradigm: Punitive to Prevention*

Punishment is a necessary purpose in any society, but punishment alone has been ineffective in fostering self-change (OPEN, 2006). Research has shown consistently that prisons are not effective deterrents to criminal behavior. In addition, a decline in educational and vocational prison programs has occurred from the rapid growth of prisons, the frequent transferring of prisoners from facility to facility, decreased state and federal funding for rehabilitation, and greater interest in short-term prison programs (Lawrence et al., 2002). Long-term prison programs are considered cost prohibitive, whereas short-term programs are supposedly cost-effective; yet, short-term programs have not delivered on the promise of reducing recidivism among ex-prisoners (Lawrence et al., 2002).

Simply incarcerating an individual, treating said individual, and returning the individual to the same socially disorganized community without new resources and coping skills is not productive (Du Bois & Berg, 2002). It is therefore critical that society re-evaluate the effectiveness of both prison-based and community-based programming that has been designed to assist the offender in the transformation process from criminal offender to law-abiding citizen. The reward of knowing that a positive future awaits each upon release is far more motivating than any form of punishment or coercion that society can devise (OPEN, 2006). Assisting the offender in changing his or her perceptions of the future can lead to positive behavioral changes and encourage positive growth among prisoners and ex-prisoners (OPEN, 2006).

### *Reestablish an Ethos of Reintegration*

Creating an ethos of reintegration can be accomplished, but it will take cooperation and a coordinated effort by all members of society. As mentioned, the eventual expunging of criminal records might provide the promise of hope that society will forgive the misdeeds of a past. Prisoners must demonstrate control over their thinking, emotions, and behaviors and accept the fact that respect is earned and forgiveness for their past behavior, while unlikely, is not unheard of. To facilitate change, Travis (2005) suggests creating reentry courts, which would deal specifically with the issues confronting ex-prisoners. The reentry court judge would evaluate the offender's progress every month to ensure that the ex-prisoner is abiding by the predetermined conditions of the reentry plan, and the parole officer would serve as a case manager not necessarily an enforcer (Travis, 2005). This approach is more rehabilitative as opposed to the commonly employed retributive approach to crime and deviance and is more likely to be effective in reducing crime.

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