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Time To End Recidivism

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When Martha Stewart walks out of the Federal Correctional Institute in Alderson, West Virginia, on March 6, she can look forward to returning to her luxurious \$40 million, 153-acre home in Bedford, New York. She already has a job lined up with her company at a salary of nearly \$1 million per year. She is planning a TV reality show in the fall, and there is talk of a potential multimillion-dollar book deal in the works. In short, she will have very little trouble putting her criminal past behind her and reintegrating into society.

But what about the other 177 women who will be released from US prisons that day and every other day of the year? Will society be as willing to embrace them? What about their housing and employment? What will be their reality show?

Most women released from incarceration face tremendous hurdles as they set out to rebuild normal lives, including such basic needs as finding housing and a job; re-establishing ties with children, family and friends; and rebuilding self-confidence and self-esteem.

These difficulties can be better understood after considering the background and experiences of the average woman in prison.

Of these 177 women--on average, they will be 35 years old--fifty-seven will be white, eighty-two will be black and twenty-nine will be Hispanic. Fewer than forty-four will be married, and 118 will have minor children. Of those with children, twenty-six will have an alcohol dependence problem and thirty-seven will have a diagnosed mental illness. Seventy-four will not have finished high school, and more than half were unemployed before arrest. For those who were working, fifty-eight had incomes of less than \$600 per month and fifty-three were on welfare.

With little more than the proverbial bus ticket and pocket money, the women will be released from prison and told to stay out of trouble. Not surprisingly, the net result is that within three years of leaving prison, 101 will commit a new offense and sixty-nine will go back to jail. But this doesn't have to be.

Recidivism is a significant issue, and if we want to achieve long-term reductions in crime it must be addressed. Nationally, the recidivism rate is 67 percent. For women--a fast-growing segment of the prison population--the rate is 58 percent. A 2002 federal study showed that the recidivism rate of

prisoners released in 1994 was 5 percent higher than of prisoners released in 1983. While we have made enormous gains in reducing crime on the street, we have not progressed at all in stopping those who are released from prison from committing new offenses.

This result is not surprising. One of the unfortunate aspects of the "tough on crime" attitude of the 1990s was a severe cutback in prison-based programs to prepared inmates for re-entry into society.

These cuts affected rehabilitation measures like drug treatment programs, as well as vocational and educational classes. By mid-decade, just 6 percent of the \$22 billion that states spent on prisons was being used for in-prison programs like vocational, educational or life skills training, according to an Urban Institute study.

Most funding for prison college programs was eliminated, leading to the closing of some 350 such programs nationwide. Many states, including New York, barred inmates from taking college extension courses. The 1994 federal crime bill made inmates ineligible to receive federal Pell Grants to fund the costs of college study. Even secondary education programs suffered. In California the number of prison teachers actually fell by 200 during the 1990s even as the number of prisoners jumped from 30,000 to 160,000. As a result, by the end of the decade only 9 percent of inmates were participating in full-time job training or education programs, and 24 percent remained completely idle.

While strong on rhetoric, the results were predictably weak on crime. Severe underfunding of pre- and postrelease education and job placement programs runs counter to what we know about proven interventions to reduce recidivism. Studies have clearly shown that participants in prison education, vocation and work programs have recidivism rates 20-60 percent lower than those of nonparticipants. Another recent major study of prisoners found that participants in education programs were 29 percent less likely to end up back in prison, and that participants earned higher wages upon release.

The idea of forgiveness is deeply entrenched among the American people. Witness any number of public figures who have erred, only to be accepted back into mainstream society. The issue is that while we are willing to accept the errant ways of noted figures, are we similarly willing to accept the errant ways of those not notable?

Support for quality education, job training and employment cuts across the political spectrum. The self-esteem and self-confidence that flow from quality education and employment are society's best deterrent against crime. Providing tools to ex-offenders so they can remove themselves from the cycle of crime is no less worthy than providing those same tools to those who needed to escape the cycle of welfare. And in doing so, we not only help ex-offenders become productive, law-abiding citizens, but we can further reduce crime--a goal all should support.

It is time to end recidivism as we know it.