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Committee of Friends and Relatives of Prisoners

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Inside/Outside: A Model for Social Support and Rehabilitation of Young Black Men

Harold Adams and Castellano Turner

Abstract

This paper first identifies some of the most important problems facing incarcerated young black males. Next, we present an historical analysis that pinpoints the War on Drugs as the primary origin of mass incarceration of that group. Then we describe the major consequences for prisoners as well as collateral problems for their families, friends, and communities. We then outline the types of programs created to address these problems. We summarize research that shows the key to solving high recidivism rates is social support during incarceration and after release. We describe in particular a Boston-based organization, the Committee of Friends and Relatives of Prisoners (CFROP), that identifies the incarceration-related problems, advocates for policy solutions, and provides material assistance to prisoners and their friends and families.

Description of the Problem

The criminal justice system in United States is failing in many ways to meet its obligation to make our lives as secure as possible by preventing crime and apprehending, punishing, and rehabilitating criminals. Instead, it has devolved into a system that amplifies

criminal behavior by following policies that are meant to impose racial control, rather than protect the public and rehabilitate offenders. Major outcomes of these failures are the mass incarceration of poor black males and their high recidivism rate. The latter, we argue, is caused by too few employment opportunities, inadequate rehabilitation programs, a lack of available housing, and the general alienation of ex-prisoners from society and even from the usual sources of social support.

The data on these problems are indeed grim (Alexander, 2011). Compared to other Western nations, the United States has by far the largest percentage of its citizens incarcerated, at least six times as many (Pettit and Western, 2004). People of color (African American or Latino) comprise 30 percent of the population but account for 60 percent of those in prison (American Progress News Release, 2012). Although only 14 percent of the population is black, 37 percent of those currently incarcerated are. More than 30 percent of black men will be incarcerated at some point in their lives (Williams, 2011). In excess of 50 percent of black youth are under the legal control of the criminal justice system and permanently barred from the full rights of citizenship because once incarcerated on a serious charge, a person carries the label of felon. This has the effect of restricting access to jobs, housing, safety-net programs, professional certifications, and voting rights. Thus, ex-prisoners are kept out of the mainstream culture and economy. The restrictions are permanent roadblocks to reintegration (Alexander, 2012). Eighty percent of all prisoners are indigent. Consequently, they are unable to make bail or hire adequate legal counsel, leaving them vulnerable at every stage of the incarceration process (Alexander, 2012). Eighty percent of those in prison were arrested for marijuana possession or sale (Alexander, 2012). We must conclude that the criminal justice system is a major contributor to these grim statistics, which reflect the laws and policy decisions that have been made since the 1950s.

History of the Problem

One of the unfortunate backlashes to the Civil Rights Movement and the Anti-Vietnam War Movement (1950s through 1970s) was

the emergence of rhetoric about “law and order,” code words easily deciphered as a racist pretext for regaining social and political control by whites. Freedom marches, peaceful acts of civil disobedience, urban uprisings, and violent crimes in general were lumped together to create a general picture of lawlessness. On the basis of this construction, Congress and state legislatures passed laws that cynically played on the fears and resentments of whites, especially in the South (Alexander, 2012). Unfortunately, the 1980s also witnessed an economic collapse in many urban communities that was indirectly caused by globalization. With fewer jobs available in their local communities and racial discrimination in virtually all occupations, black communities were caught in a vise that resulted in an expansion of drug use (Turner and Turner, 1981).

The War on Crime became the foundation for the even more insidious War on Drugs. The carrying out of the mandate of this later war became the mass arrest of young men of color—especially of black youth (Rios, 2006).

The federal government provided enormous resources to wage this war on illegal drugs. Police forces were given grants, military equipment, and logistical support, forms of aid that were difficult to resist.

In practice, the War on Drugs became a war against black communities. Police and prosecutors were given incentives to make drug-related arrests, which focused far more on black communities than white ones. Police officers used a variety of pretexts to stop and search black youth. Their rationale seemed to be “the more you search, the more likely you are to find somebody with an illegal substance.” The federal government, by providing more and more funds and resources, encouraged local police to find pretexts to stop and search nonwhites. This method of profiling is one of the major causes of the disproportion of black youth in prison for nonviolent crimes. The discretion granted to police by the courts to identify and stop potential drug users and sellers essentially legalizes discrimination against black youth.

Another reason for the inordinate number of black youth in prison has been the unequal treatment they receive at every level of the criminal adjudication process. First, the police target black neighborhoods and black youth. Officers use aggressive and intimidating

methods in dealing with blacks, and make arrests more often than in encounters with white youth. Second, prosecutors have a good deal of discretion in deciding which crime to charge. This discretion is sometimes blatantly biased. In pretrial negotiation, prosecutors can attempt to intimidate and frighten black suspects by over-charging, in order to get individuals to plead guilty. Whites are more successful in gaining lesser charges and lenient treatment, leading to significantly shorter sentences (Rehavi and Starr, 2012). Of those charged with death-eligible crimes, 48 percent were black, 29 percent were Latino, and 20 percent were white (Coker, 2003). Finally, the U.S. Supreme Court has given the police and prosecutors a license to discriminate by denying any appeal based on racial bias—unless race was explicitly mentioned as a reason for an arrest or prosecution (Alexander, 2012). Naturally, police have learned never to mention race during arrests.

When crack cocaine came onto the drug scene in the 1980s, it was a perfect excuse for intensifying the war. Crack, which is cheaper and provides a more intense high than powder cocaine, became identified with the black community and gave every level of the criminal justice system a target they felt free to go after. The federal and state governments cooperated in writing laws with extraordinarily harsh sentences for possession of crack and relatively modest sentences for the possession and sale of the more expensive powder cocaine, which was viewed as a relatively harmless recreational drug for whites.

A major reason for the disproportion of black youth in prison is mandatory minimum sentences. Bias, conscious or unconscious, leads prosecutors to charge black youth with offenses that carry mandatory sentences more often (Rehavi and Starr, 2012). Combined with the War on Drugs, the scene was set for implementing the war on youth in communities of color. Mass incarceration has nearly become a routine of the culture of the United States.

Consequences of Incarceration

Not only the person who goes to jail suffers. There are negative consequences for families and the communities from which the incarcerated come. The consequences for prisoners seem obvious—shame; loss of freedom; separation from family and friends; inability to support

or help family; loss of the right to vote; in some instances, abusive, degrading, and exploitative treatment; and even danger from abuse by other inmates. There are consequences, however, that go well beyond the obvious. The incarcerated may experience a variety of negative emotions, especially guilt about having put the family in a difficult situation. After release, there are consequences that will endure for the rest of the person's life. Once convicted of a felony, an individual is excluded from certain jobs, public housing, benefits of social safety-net programs such as food stamps, government education programs, military service, and voting—for a period or, in some cases, indefinitely. The ability to find housing and employment are particularly critical. A criminal record may well narrow the options available. One's period of incarceration may have put a strain on relations with the person's spouse, children, and other family members.

Consequences for the family are present during incarceration as well as after it. The family shares the stigma of a criminal record. Most lose income during and after the incarceration. Chronic unemployment is common among ex-prisoners. The family's housing may be threatened by the criminal record. If the family tries to maintain contact by telephone or visitation, there is an additional financial burden on the family. The inmate's absence may disrupt normal family functioning and lead to dysfunction. If there are children, the father's absence may deprive them of needed supervision and a role model. Food insecurity may cause inadequate nutrition, and it may also lead to poor school performance and health problems. If mothers are forced to work more in order to survive, children may be left to fend for themselves, which may make them vulnerable to influences on the streets that may lead to crime. Children who have an incarcerated parent are more likely to find themselves in the criminal system and more likely to end up in jail themselves. This pattern is especially worrying because black children are much more likely than whites to have a parent in prison (7 percent for blacks versus 2 percent for whites) (Alexander, 2012).

Even after a family member is released from prison, the family faces a number of threats. Families living in public housing face eviction if the ex-prisoner rejoins his family there (Alexander, 2012). If the

ex-prisoner does not find employment, he further drains the family's limited resources. The financial pressures created by that situation may lead to further criminal behavior and a return to prison, thus continuing a vicious cycle.

Solutions

Alexander (2012) has made a convincing argument for dismantling the War on Drugs, which she concluded led to both the mass incarceration of young black males and to an increase in crime. She also urges repealing laws dictating harsh mandatory minimum sentences for relatively minor nonviolent offenses. Replacing laws that created overcrowded prisons and expanded the building of new prisons would free up resources to institute programs and policies to keep people out of prison. Lindquist et al. (2009) have shown that there are very few programs to help ex-offenders stay out of jail. Many more programs seem designed to ensure that many will return to prison.

If the goal is to institute programs and interventions that lead to lower recidivism, there is ample evidence that social support is a critical determinant. When a young man is incarcerated, among the most difficult experiences to handle are separation and extended isolation from family and friends who provide social support.

There is evidence that social support of all kinds facilitates reentry into the community. Berg and Huebner (2011) found that family ties were a major determinant of both gaining employment and decreasing recidivism rates. Bahr et al. (2010), working with parolees specifically, showed that successful reentry and avoiding a return to prison were related to more support from family and friends. Martinez and Christian (2009) also found, whether living with family or elsewhere, that family support was the major predictor of avoiding a return to prison. Nelson (2011) reported that the most important factors in a successful reentry were connections to family, employment, and safe housing.

The research literature consistently indicates a positive relationship between nonrecidivism and a particular form of social support during incarceration: visitations. Bales and Mears (2008) decisively demonstrated a strong relationship between visitation by family and

friends and lowering the likelihood of return to prison. Duwe and Clark (2012) began by assuming that social support was important in avoiding recidivism. But, they found an even more striking and direct relationship between the extent of visitations (whether from family, clergy, or mentor) and recidivism.

If it is clearly understood and demonstrated that social support generally, and visitations in particular, increase the likelihood of successful reentry and avoiding return to prison, have there been programmatic interventions to enhance support and visitations? Focusing specifically on the quality of relationships, Charkoudian et al. (2012) successfully worked with inmates and their families before release. Cunningham (2001) reported on the success of a program that created a sympathetic environment in which inmates and their children could meet during incarceration. Both studies later reported a reduction in recidivism.

The Family Justice Organization created a successful management tool to reduce recidivism. In preparation for release, the organization helped inmates to focus attention on family and social networks that might be available in case of need (diZerega and Shapiro, 2007). In a similar approach, Yablonski (1960) held family counseling sessions for months before release, and the recidivism rate improved.

In addition to family support and visitation, it appears that recidivism can be reduced by offering substance abuse treatment (Visher and O'Connell, 2012). Visher and O'Connell also found that receiving family support, having children, and avoiding negative family influences (incarceration or drug use by a family member) reduced recidivism.

The literature is clear in reporting that social support, and specifically visitation, is helpful in reducing recidivism. Therefore, everything possible should be done to facilitate all forms of contact between inmates and their family and friends. Bales and Mears (2008) summarized the literature reporting useful, low-cost ways to increase visitation:

1. Place the inmate as near to home as possible
2. Encourage community service agencies and organizations to visit inmates

3. Ensure adequate parking
4. Extend visiting hours
5. Reduce bureaucratic barriers
6. Increase professionalism of staff who supervise visits
7. Make the visiting areas hospitable for children.

CFROP: A Massachusetts Self-Help Response

The Committee of Friends and Relatives of Prisoners (CPROP) is an all-volunteer, nonprofit association with three basic purposes: first, **bring together** the family, friends, and allies of prisoners into an association supportive of prisoner rights and humane treatment; second, **provide and share material assistance** to enhance their support for prisoners; and third, **advocate** for just and humane treatment of prisoners in the community, within the criminal justice system, and by the policy-makers who should design and oversee just and humane treatment of prisoners.

The first purpose is achieved by creating and building a self-help association. The members are recruited from the community at large and especially from communities from which many prisoners come. In addition to family and friends of prisoners, a wide range of professionals and businesses provide assistance with services and donations. The members pay a token amount (\$1 per month), which partially pays for the administrative needs of the association (e.g., office rental and supplies). The only other, and more important, requirement is to provide, as able, the volunteer services needed to maintain and increase the membership. The total number of people who have benefited from the work of CFROP is difficult to estimate. The membership is increased primarily by canvassing, setting up recruiting tables at a variety of meetings in Boston and surrounding communities, and by making invited presentations to nongovernmental organizations and local higher education institutions. Among the major benefits to members is the provision of transportation for visitations, which, as was shown earlier, is very important in reducing recidivism.

The second purpose is attained by providing members with a benefits program. This includes several mechanisms to help family and friends remain in contact with the prisoner. These will be elaborated on later in this paper.

The third purpose implies that we understand the limitations of group association and even material assistance. The former is psychologically and strategically important but does not answer the long-term need for change in larger systems. Likewise, the material assistance may meet emergency and critical needs of the present, but it does not answer the persistent, growing problems that continue to plague prisoners, their families and friends, and the community. In order to address this purpose, CFROP and similar organizations commit to the never-ending process of confronting policy makers (whether political or bureaucratic) about the demonstrable injustice, cruelty, and exploitation of those incarcerated and their families.

History of CFROP

The Committee of Friends and Relatives of Prisoners was founded in the Boston area in 2004. It took its name, aims, and model from the original CFROP, established on Long Island in 1977. The original organization was established in response to problems of unconstitutional abuse of inmates in Suffolk County Jail, including the lack of medical treatment. The families and friends of prisoners, along with equal justice advocates, demonstrated and filed suits to challenge the practices. But they also wanted to deal with some of the problems leading to incarceration and the problems resulting from incarceration. The CFROP mission was to promote self-help efforts to benefit families and friends of prisoners.

Structure

Membership. The members of CFROP are its essential structure. Once having joined, a member becomes part of a network that includes not only families and friends of prisoners, but also a larger group of volunteer staff members. Both the members and the staff assume a variety of functions: office telephone and walk-in coverage; coordination of benefits, recruitment, and transportation; record keeping; newsletter production, including writing articles about CFROP concerns, activities, and plans; and resource development.

Board of Directors. CFROP's Board of Directors is made up of family and friends of prisoners, as well as a broad range of local community professionals. The functions of the board are policy develop-

ment, support of activities, guidance in the implementation of projects, and resource development. The board is chaired by its president or the operations manager.

Benefits Council. This group is comprised of members and staff whose primary function is to allocate resources—including services, such as the transportation benefits.

Services

As demonstrated earlier, one of the major problems of prisoners is isolation from the support of family and friends. The research evidence indicates the continuity of relationships during the period of incarceration is related to lower recidivism. The CFROP benefits program is largely designed to reduce this isolation, and thereby reduce recidivism. As is clear from the following list of nine benefits, most contribute to maintaining contact between prisoners and their families and friends:

1. Transportation. Many jails and prisons in Massachusetts are located in areas distant from the Boston area. Public transportation is often expensive and inconvenient. CFROP organizes volunteers to provide transportation for families and friends of prisoners to and from jails and prisons. CFROP has arranged transportation to the following facilities: MCI-Cedar Junction (Walpole); Souza Baranowski Correctional Center; MCI-Shirley; Wyatt Detention Facility (Rhode Island); Old Colony Correctional Center; MCI-Norfolk; MCI-Framingham; Essex County Correctional Center; Plymouth County Correctional Facility; Bridgewater State Hospital; Billerica Jail and House of Correction; and Hampden County Jail and House of Correction.

2. Correspondence and Postage. Some who wish to write letters to prisoners might not be able to afford postage. If a member provides a sealed and addressed envelope, CFROP will mail it. Special-occasion cards are also available through donations from supportive individuals and organizations.

3. Message Center and Hotline. Loss of family contact because of eviction, moving, or loss of home phone service can be traumatic for both prisoners and their families. At times, prisoners have critical health or legal problems but cannot reach family for help. Prisoners

can call the message center and hotline collect to leave messages. Family members without phones can also call prisoners by arrangement. This communication link is important in building a sense of community between prisoners and their families and others on the outside. CFROP has accepted collect calls from prisoners in the following facilities: MCI-Norfolk; Hampden County Jail; MCI-Concord; Souza Baranowski Correctional Center; Plymouth County Correctional Facility; and Immigration and Customs Enforcement Detention Center in Edwards, Alabama.

4. Pen Pal Correspondence. CFROP understands that one of the problems prisoners face is loneliness and isolation from family and friends. In the absence of such contact, it is sometimes possible to locate volunteers willing to build positive ties between prisoners and the community beyond the prison walls.

5. Prisoner Needs Benefit. Prisoners are no longer able to receive packages from family and friends. Some families are often unable to afford the permissible alternative, providing funds for the commissary purchases. CFROP is organizing supportive individuals to sponsor prisoners' purchase of basic hygiene items, postage, and dietary supplements. CFROP also organized a back-to-school backpack, school supplies, and picnic for the children of incarcerated parents.

6. CFROP Newsletter, *Inside/Outside*. The quarterly membership newsletter contains news of organizational events, programs, needs, and issues of concern to the membership. The newsletter also acts as an educational tool for sharing with family and community what is happening in the prisons and the criminal justice system.

7. Document Advocacy. CFROP helps families and friends of prisoners obtain, fill out, and submit administrative forms necessary for communication and access to prisoners.

8. Hospitality Benefit. Many prisons in the state are located far enough from the greater Boston area to require visitors to spend more than a day for travel and visit time. CFROP is organizing supportive individuals and organizations in areas near prisons to donate overnight housing.

9. Information and Referral Service. CFROP maintains a continually updated resource and referral listing of services available through private organizations and public agencies in the area; it instructs how to find them, how to access them, and which are reliable sources of help. CFROP has made referrals to volunteer lawyers, which stopped two home foreclosures, four utilities shut-offs, and two evictions. Volunteer medical professionals provided free eye exams and glasses.

Education

CFROP's contributions to the local community go beyond the services provided to its members. Its community education campaign consists of speaking engagements; publication and distribution of the newsletter, *Inside/Outside*; literature tables at local meetings; door-to-door canvassing; community forums and panel participation; and radio and TV appearances. The aim of these efforts is to make the broader community aware of the unjust and exploitative treatment of prisoners. These efforts also serve as methods of CFROP recruitment and fundraising. Speaking engagements at educational institutions have included Andover Newton Theological School; Bancroft School; Boston University's Sociology Department, School of Law, School of Criminal Justice, and School of Management; Edison Middle School; Harvard University School of Law and Divinity School; Lasell College Center for Community-Based Education; New England School of Law; Framingham State College; Curry College; and Roxbury Community College Criminal Justice Program.

CFROP has made presentations at the following religious institutions: St. John's Episcopal Church (Westwood); First Church of Stow and Acton; Congregation Dorshei Tzedek (Newton); Sacred Heart Parish Justice and Peace Committee (Newton); and First Church in Belmont, Unitarian Universalist.

In addition, CFROP has made other presentations at Bunker Hill Community Justice Society, Shelburne Community Center, Men's Resource Center (Worcester), Dudley Library "Three Strikes Forum" panel, Perkins School for the Blind, "Three Strikes" panel (Watertown), and a State House forum on "Three Strikes."

Advocacy

A central aspect of CFROP's work is monitoring and analysis of laws and policy changes that have an impact on prisoners and their families and friends. The organization has recently contributed to advocacy efforts in three areas: the reversal of a policy of charging prisoners rent, the overcharging for telephone services, and the exploitation of prisoner labor.

Rent. The sheriff of Bristol County had, several years earlier, instituted this rental policy. CFROP demonstrated, organized canvassing and letter-writing campaigns, gave testimony at hearings, and joined a successful suit that led to a judicial order to cease and repay prisoners. The court granted a large monetary judgment, to be distributed to affected prisoners and their families. Not only have the rental charges ceased, but also the suit's success has prevented other counties from trying anything similar.

Telephone Overcharging. CFROP is committed to the notion that it is of utmost importance to support the continuity of contact between prisoners and their families and friends. Visitations are particularly important, but telephone and mail contact are important as well. As indicated earlier, the research evidence is clear in indicating a relationship between such contact and successful reentry (housing, employment, etc.), which relates to recidivism. Policies and practices within the criminal justice system sometimes undermine this basic principle. For several years, there has been a national scandal related to the exorbitant charges prisoners must pay for telephone services. The people of Massachusetts, like many other states, have been somewhat aware of this abusive practice but have had no way to change it. Both the telephone companies and the prison facilities have profited from this practice. Over the last year, members and staff of CFROP have been engaged in a campaign to bring this problem to the attention of the public and policy makers. Community forums, testimony before regulatory bodies, and letter-writing campaigns have succeeded. Regulatory bodies have begun to acknowledge the problem and require telephone companies and the criminal justice facilities to lower charges to a reasonable level.

Exploitation of Labor. Alexander (2011, 2012) has made the case that the current practices of the criminal justice system are analogous to slavery and the practices of the Jim Crow era in the United States. The explosive growth of the prison populations around the country is a direct result of the policies arising out of the War on Crime and War on Drugs. The former arose out of unfortunate confluence of crime with legal demonstrations and civil disobedience practices during the Civil Rights Movement. The War on Drugs had the effect of targeting poor young men of color—especially black youth. Bias at every level of the criminal justice system led to extraordinary inequality in the outcomes of this war. Add to these “wars” the passing of “three strikes, you’re out” laws, and we can understand why the prison population in the United States is the highest among industrialized nations—and continues to grow. In Massachusetts, the overrepresentation of the poor is indicated by the fact that 95 percent of those in prison come from the poorest towns in the state. The overrepresentation of people of color is suggested by the fact that they make up only 16 percent of the state population but 56 percent of those imprisoned.

The swelling of the prison population has required the building of new prisons, most often placed in rural areas that have an economic stake in the employment of local residents. With the prison population growing, the consequent prison-industrial-military-congressional complex developed. Prisons became a source of very cheap labor. Industrial corporations lobbied and got access to this cheap labor. Even the United States military benefited by having prisoners make military hardware. The part that Congress and state legislatures play in this collaboration is to yield to lobbying and pass laws that inevitably lead to an increase in the need for prisons—such as laws to wage the wars on crime and drugs and to impose life sentences for three strikes and minimum mandatory sentences for nonviolent offenses. Each of these groups has a vested interest in the maintenance and growth of prisons. Because this process is widely supported by the electorate, it goes largely unnoticed and underreported. Lawmakers and voters in some states have recoiled at the pressure to raise taxes to maintain current incarceration levels. In response, some state legislatures have reduced incarceration for nonviolent drug offenders. More extensive budget-

ary relief would require building and staffing fewer prisons, exploiting prison labor to pay part of the bill for corrections, or repealing three strikes and mandatory minimum sentences that extend how long offenders spend in prison.

The exploitation does not end with this virtually free prison labor. Families are made to suffer beyond the loss that comes from the incarceration of a breadwinner. At every opportunity, the families of prisoners are made to pay fees of various types to offset the cost to the prison and the criminal justice establishment—for parole and probation supervision, drug and alcohol testing, GPS and electronic monitoring, polygraph testing, funds processing, health care co-payments, locker rental, and telephone prepaid and collect call processing. Add to these fees the additional costs of visitations to remote prisons. Considering that the families are very often poor, these multiple and recurring costs are a serious burden, which may cause breaks in their sense of support and alliance with the prisoners.

CFROP's options in confronting this problem are few. The major players in the current arrangement have money and political power behind them. CFROP can only try to make this information available and hope that it will move people to join with others to confront this issue further.

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