

# The problems of reintegration criminology essay



A large number of the people who are released from prison are incarcerated again within a short period of time. Ex-prisoners confront many problems in the effort to be reintegrated into society. These problems include a lack of social support, inability to gain access to vital resources and services, the resistance of the community, lack of education, and lack of adequate job preparation. These factors make it difficult for ex-prisoners to adjust to life in the community and thereby increase the risk that they will return to a life of crime. There are certain things that prison ministers can do to help prisoners make a successful transition to life on the outside. Prison ministers can be involved in programs that help prepare prisoners through education and training. Ministers can provide prisoners with support during the reentry process. In addition, they can build relationships in the community that serve as "bridges" for prisoners when they make the change from life in prison to life in the general population. Prison ministers can also help prisoners reintegrate by tending to their spiritual needs.

Prison provides a place for offenders to pay their debt to society by being punished for the crimes they have committed. Ideally, prison will rehabilitate offenders so they can be reintegrated into society after being released. The alternative to reintegration is for prisoners to return to a life of crime. Ex-prisoners face many challenges in the effort to achieve successful reentry into society. Some of these challenges are related to the material things that people need in order to survive. Released prisoners often find it difficult to obtain jobs, housing and the other necessities of life. Other challenges are related to a lack of social support. In order to be effectively reintegrated into society, ex-prisoners need positive forms of support and encouragement

from family members, friends or others in the community. This paper will examine the potential problems that might occur during reintegration after prison. The paper will emphasize the perspective of the prison minister.

There are several things that prison ministers can do to help prisoners make the transition to community life after their release.

### The Problems Associated with Reintegration

In the United States, nearly 700, 000 people are released from prison each year (Hesse, 2009). It has been estimated that as many as 75 percent of these people will be incarcerated again within four years after their release (Rabey, 1999). This is a problem known as recidivism. One reason for the high rate of recidivism is because many ex-prisoners lack social support. For example, during long prison terms, offenders often lose contact with family members. This is problematic because " contact with family members is believed to facilitate reintegration into the community" (Lynch & Sabol, 2001, p. 2). If ex-prisoners do not have the caring support of family members, they need to be able to get social support from a different source, such as friends, a community-based support group, or a church fellowship. A lack of support often leads to ex-prisoners associating with their former friends in the criminal world. In the words of Hesse (2009), " because many released inmates will not have solid attachments to family or community, they will most likely return to old neighborhoods where their very presence may threaten to disrupt their success" (p. 64).

Further difficulties are raised by feelings of fear and discrimination among the members of the community. Communities are often resistant to the

presence of ex-prisoners because of their concerns for public safety (Lynch & Sabol, 2001). When ex-prisoners arrive in the community, they do so " with criminal labels that limit their ability to secure housing, treatment services, and employment" (Pogorzelski, et al., 2005, p. 1718). Clearly, ex-prisoners will not be able to reintegrate into society unless they are able to obtain jobs that provide them with enough income to support themselves. In addition to the difficulty of obtaining a job because of the " criminal label," " there may be competition between returning prisoners and welfare leavers for jobs" (Lynch & Sabol, 2001, p. 19). Furthermore, ex-prisoners are often forced to take low-paying, low-skill jobs. As noted by Lynch & Sabol (2001), " the low pay of these jobs enhances the possibility that involvement in illegitimate, income-producing activities will increase" (p. 19).

Former inmates face these kinds of challenges despite the passage of the federal law known as the Second Chance Act of 2005. The purpose of this legislation is to ensure that ex-prisoners receive the services that they need when they reenter society. According to the findings in a study by Pogorzelski, et al. (2005), the Second Chance Act has done little to alleviate the challenges faced by former prisoners in the effort to gain access to housing, public assistance and other necessary resources. These researchers have found that there are " invisible punishments" built into the policies and programs that are supposed to help ex-prisoners reintegrate into society. For example, local laws often place limitations on the ability of former prisoners to fill out job applications, acquire housing or receive public assistance. As stated by Pogorzelski, et al. (2005), these laws " are, in effect, exclusionary public policies that regulate reentry experiences and, in essence, perpetuate

punishment after release by assigning special conditions or bans on people with felony convictions" (p. 1718). As claimed by Hesse (2009), "many will return to crime to support themselves because accessibility to social services and other supports may not be available" (p. 64).

Another reason why reintegration efforts often fail is because offenders do not receive the preparation that they need when they are still in prison. Many people in prison have problems involving such things as mental illness or substance abuse (Pogorzelski, et al., 2005). The prison system does not provide adequate treatment for these kinds of problems. In addition, prisoners do not generally receive the kind of job training that they need in order to be able to succeed in outside life. As noted by Lynch & Sobel (2001), a large number of released prisoners "reenter society not having participated in educational, vocational, or pre-release programs" (p. 2). The lack of education and job training contributes to the high recidivism rate among ex-prisoners. There is evidence showing that prisoners tend to be "far less educated than the general population" (Hesse, 2009, p. 64). For ex-prisoners, a lack of education and training can mean a low-paying job or no job at all. This, in turn, increases the risk of released prisoners failing to achieve reintegration into the community and returning to a life of crime.

### Prison Ministry and Reintegration

Prison ministers can play an important role in helping prisoners prepare for life after their release. For example, ministers can arrange for prisoners to receive job training or educational services. Ministers can also help prisoners make the transition to community life by being supportive and caring.

However, prisoners need more than this in order to succeed in the reintegration process. Regarding the limits of prison ministry, McRoberts (2002) notes that " spirituality may help people survive the hardships and absurdities of incarceration, but life on the outside poses a radically different existential challenge" (p. 2). Rabey (1999) agrees that prison ministers need to place more emphasis on " aftercare" and the reintegration of prisoners into communities and churches after their release (p. 27). A problem is created by the fact that many church members are resistant to the idea of providing large amounts of assistance to former prisoners (McRoberts, 2002, p. 7). To address this problem, prison ministers need to work at building relationships with community ministers and to thereby strengthen the " bridge" between prison life and community life.

Prison ministers also have a vital role to play in helping prisoners adjust themselves spirituality to what life will be like after their release. As Rabey (1999) points out, prison ministries have shifted their attention " from punishment to redemption, and from retributive justice to 'restorative justice'" (p. 27). In order to achieve successful reintegration, prisoners need to experience a sense of healing and restoration.

## Conclusion

As discussed in this paper, various factors create challenges for ex-prisoners in their effort to be reintegrated into society. These factors include a lack of social support, community resistance, the inability to get a decent job, lack of access to necessary services, and a low level of education. The challenges faced by ex-prisoners greatly increase the risk of recidivism. Prison ministries

can play a role in helping ex-prisoners make a successful transition to community life. Prison ministers can help prepare prisoners for life on the outside while they are still in prison. They can work with community ministers to provide a bridge to life on the outside. They can make efforts to be sure that ex-prisoners will receive the resources and social support that they need to survive in the community. In addition, prison ministers can contribute to the reintegration process by tending to the spiritual needs of prisoners as they prepare for their reentry into society.