

OFFENDER REENTRY:

What it Means to the Law Enforcement Community

By Leonard A. Sipes, Jr.

Approximately 650,000 offenders are released from incarceration every year in the United States. Hundreds of thousands more are released from jails. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, over two thirds of state releases are rearrested for felonies and serious misdemeanors within three years. (*Source* www.ojp.usdoj.gov.)

Fifty percent are reincarcerated. The numbers would be greater if one counted all arrests (rather than just serious misdemeanors) and revocations for technical reasons from parole and probation agencies.

Those statistics produce an array of responses. To some, it's a problem that's too big to "solve." The response by many is to ignore it, especially considering the enormity of other social problems.

But others, particularly those of us within the criminal justice community, focus on the evidence that reentry programs can make a meaningful difference in the lives of many returning offenders. Programs conducted both within and outside of prison can reduce criminality and its broad societal impact.

Any impact on recidivism means fewer victims of crime. The stories that many read about in the morning

paper, and often forget by lunchtime, become landmark events in the lives of victims. These events stay with them forever, and have a profound impact on any community's ability to sustain itself. As all of us know, criminal victimization has endless social, moral and political implications.

The majority of offenders are parents. Many of us have interacted with their children, as well as with the mothers and grandmothers who are caring for these children. The results of a parent's criminality can be devastating to the lives of children; research indicates self-destructive behaviors and increased delinquency.

Why Support Reentry?

For some, supporting programs for people coming out of prison is difficult. But it is in our pragmatic self-interest to become meaningfully involved in reentry efforts. When it comes to improving the lives of those mentioned above, efforts to assist offenders lessen the burden for everyone.

The reasons for supporting reentry programs are as varied as people themselves. Some see it as a religious duty. Others view reentry as part of a need to assist people coming from troubled backgrounds. Many within the victim's community understand that reentry programming reduces recidivism and produces fewer victims. Some see it as a common-sense approach to dealing with returning offenders. Governors seeking ways to redirect tax dollars for schools or the elderly offer support in lieu of building and operating new prisons.

During his State of the Union address in 2004, President George W. Bush called for support of reentry, and community and faith-based programs. President Bush proposed "[a] plan to harness the resources and experience of faith-based and community organizations in dealing with the challenges of helping returning inmates contribute to society." The President's statement moved reentry to center stage in the minds of many.

But others justifiably want some assurance that programs for offenders have an impact. One indicator of success is the record of those released from prison via parole. Parolees participate in programs in prison and generally receive assistance and supervision from parole authorities. This results in a lower recidivism rate than those not released via parole. This conclusion is based on Department of Justice data and has been a consistent finding for many years. In every year between 1990 and 2000, State prisoners released by a parole board had higher success rates than those released through mandatory parole. Among parole discharges in 2000, 54% of discretionary parolees were successful compared to 35% of those who had received mandatory parole. (*Source* www.ojp.usdoj.gov/reentry/success.)

The Washington State Institute for Public Policy issued a study with national implications titled, "Evidence Based Adult Corrections Programs: What Works and What Does Not." The publication documents well done research throughout the country indicating that prison and community based programs focusing on the treatment and supervision of offenders reduce rearrests and prevent further victimization (*Source* www.wsipp.wa.gov/rptfiles/06-01-1201.pdf).

The cited research, plus the many findings from individual programs, especially as it applies to drug courts and drug treatment (even for those forced into treatment), indicate that programs can have a positive impact on crime, victim trauma and society.

Law Enforcement And Reentry

Many law enforcement officers feel they have been conducting reentry related activities for years. Like community oriented policing or other "new" initiatives, officers often feel that national efforts simply replicate what they were already doing. Not mentioning this would be insulting to many.

Police officials have often stated that much (if not the majority) of law enforcement is the process of helping people rather than a strict enforcement of laws. Officers have worked with countless mothers of young offenders to provide them with lists of resources and options. Officers have referred many to drug treatment and gone so far as to advocate an early entrance into programs with administrators. If officers had a dollar for every offender they have counseled over the years, they would retire thousands of dollars richer.

Officers engage in frequent conversations with parole and probation agents to keep an eye on offenders under supervision. They work cooperatively to help those in need of assistance and take action against those who pose a threat to public safety. They patrol together with parole and probation agents and exchange information. Many do this as a matter of good policing rather than taking part in an effort of national importance.

Resources

That said, national resources are becoming increasingly available to law enforcement agencies that will aid their efforts to systematically engage in reentry activities. One document is available now and two others are forthcoming. They are:

The Jail Reentry Roundtable, hosted by the Urban Institute and other agencies, and funded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance (*Source* www.urban.org/projects/reentry-roundtable/roundtable9.cfm).

Considering the fact that Sheriff's Departments operate most of the jails in this country, the document can be seen as a resource for law enforcement. The Jail Reentry Roundtable found that "At least 50 jails operate programs to successfully help inmates return successfully to society"-- reported by Crime and Justice News on June 29, 2006.

"Prisoner Reentry and Community Policing," from the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS), U.S. Department of Justice and the Urban

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Institute: (Source www.urban.org). The document provides a comprehensive review of reentry strategies and examples from the field.

A DVD and report are available from the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) and the Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) from the US Department of Justice on “Offender Re-entry”. The link for the DVD and additional materials is www.theiacp.org/profassist/ReturningOffenders.

Another document, “Building an Offender Reentry Program: A Guide for Law Enforcement,” from the Bureau of Justice Assistance and the IACP is available at www.ojp.usdoj.gov/BJA/pdf/Reentry_LE.pdf.

The essence of all the publications is a “call to action” for law enforcement to take leadership roles regarding reentry. All urge law enforcement to enter into partnerships with allied agencies to make the reentry process as effective as possible.

The Experience in Washington, D.C. – The Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency

The Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency (CSOSA) is responsible for providing community supervision to approximately 15,500 men and women on probation, parole and supervised release in the District of Columbia. CSOSA is a new federal agency, independent as of August of 2000. The agency’s operations embody the best practices of criminological research. Returning offenders are a top priority.

Most citizens of the District of Columbia are supportive of our presence and understand that the more closely we supervise and assist offenders, the less likely they are to threaten the community. The public understands that our mission, first and foremost, is their safety.

CSOSA offers a wide array of initiatives. Close to 50 percent of the offender population are in special programs or intensively supervised. Special programs involve sex offenders, high-risk substance abusers, domestic violence, drinking and driving, mental health, day reporting and anger management. These programs include both treatment and supervision.

We opened a state-of-the-art substance abuse assessment and pre-treatment center that will provide a 28-day residential program. This program will be used as both an initial placement after release from prison and a residential sanction for offenders facing revocation of release. The Reentry and Sanctions Center will serve approximately 1,000 offenders each year.

CSOSA has an inclusive faith-based partnership with local religious institutions and recruits mentors from within their congregations to assist returning offenders.

The faith community provides many services beyond mentoring. Drug treatment, clothing, housing and many other services are offered.

CSOSA operates seven field offices around the city where offenders report for supervision appointments and, in most cases, drug testing. An additional four learning lab locations provide computerized literacy programming, GED preparation, and job placement assistance.

CSOSA and MPD

CSOSA collaborates closely with the Metropolitan Police Department (MPD), conducting over 8,000 “Accountability Tours,” where Community Supervision Officers (CSO’s—what most jurisdictions refer to as parole and probation officers) visit offenders’ homes accompanied by police officers. These visits not only allow CSOs to meet with offenders and their family members in the home environment, but also ensure that MPD officers know who in the neighborhood is under active supervision.

MPD officers are often a great source of both encouragement and accountability. They frequently remind offenders that they are under supervision and that their questionable activities and associates will be reported to their CSO. This can prevent an offender from engaging in acts of lawlessness. Police personnel will ask CSO’s for a special condition of drug treatment or state that the individual has too much time on his hands and needs to go to day reporting or get assistance in finding a job. MPD officers understand that some offenders need structure and help, and some need to be brought to the attention of the U.S. Parole Commission or local court.

MPD officers also attend orientation sessions for individuals recently placed on community supervision to instruct them on CSOSA’s standards of conduct, provide information on support programs and treatment, and reinforce the consequences for further criminal behavior.

In addition to our ever-expanding collaboration with the Metropolitan Police Department, we also work closely with the US Attorney’s Office, US Marshals Service, the FBI and the D.C. Housing Authority Police and others to share information and coordinate warrant service and additional public safety efforts. In addition to working closely with District of Columbia public safety agencies, we continue to strengthen our relationships with our peers in Maryland and Virginia.

The Reentry Plan in the District of Columbia

By fostering collaboration, CSOSA involves as many law enforcement, criminal justice and community resource providers as possible in an inclusive reentry

effort. This is articulated in the Comprehensive Reentry Strategy for Adults in the District of Columbia, which was developed in 2003 to provide a detailed, long-range plan for effective reentry services that begin while the offender is incarcerated, continue during the transition from prison to the community and culminate in long-term community-based support.

CSOSA, the Mayor's office, D.C. and federal government agencies, religious and community organizations and law enforcement worked together to create the Strategy. The Strategy contains an action agenda for reentry service providers that include community education and the pursuit of legislative priorities. The document and other reentry-related materials are available on CSOSA's web site (www.csosa.gov).

So What's Possible?

Research on community based anti-crime programs indicates that law enforcement personnel are seen as primary leaders in the fight against crime. Citizens naturally look to police executives and officers for guidance and reassurance when crime problems seem to get out of hand.

The same can hold true for offender reentry. Parole and probation agencies need the power of partnerships to get the job done. While law enforcement agencies feel that they are overwhelmed with current duties, a partnership with community corrections can pay off with fewer

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crimes, safer communities and a renewed emphasis on getting the truly dangerous offenders off the streets.

Law enforcement officers can assist offenders, and, as stated above, many already do. Those out of prison or on probation need structure to change their lives. If they know that officers are watching them, then maybe they will begin the process of change. Officers can encourage or insist that those under supervision enroll in drug treatment or job readiness classes. They can be the authority figures that so many young men and women need if the youth are approached in the correct manner.

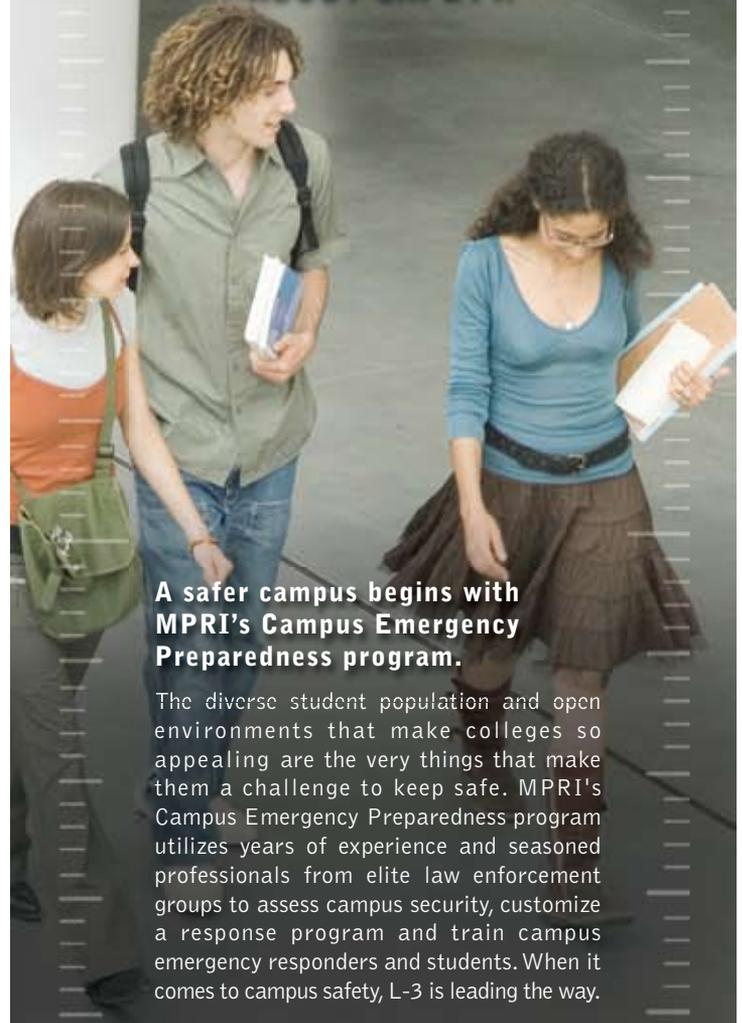
Many offenders want to change and can change with the right support. Police officers have been change agents in the lives of many caught up in lawbreaking behavior. If police and sheriff's agencies can come together with parole and probation officials, and community and business leaders to form an active partnership, then the community will be better off for the effort. It's up to us to try. ❁



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