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Commentary from our Social Research Analysts

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New Year, New Start: Prisoners have a harder time starting anew

Once again it's the time of year when many of us prepare to celebrate the New Year and its new beginnings, maybe with a New Year's Resolution to change some aspect of our lives. But what if your past denied you a fresh start, a past which may forever prohibit you from being the person you want to be? Inmates and former prisoners usually find themselves in that very situation, always forced to label themselves by their past, a persona they may have left behind, but whom society refuses to forget, never allowed the new beginning so many of us take for granted. For the past few months, this issue has been increasingly recognized by popular media, including stories on National Public Radio and a feature piece on "Last Week Tonight with John Oliver." And with the recent release of more than six thousand federal inmates—due to changes to drug crimes sentencing by the U.S. Sentencing Commission—it is important to understand how these citizens will navigate their re-assimilation into daily American life.

Many of these returning citizens will search for employment, needing to support themselves or their families. Many of us have likely come across one special checkbox on applications for jobs, loans, or educational institutions that asks if we have ever been convicted of a crime or spent time in a federal prison. Most of us can simply check 'no', move on, without sparing it a second thought, while for others in our country, having to check that ominous box could be the difference between moving forward or rescinding into crime or violence. Even previous offenders fortunate enough to receive educational, skill-based, or other types of training while imprisoned, are frequently judged only on paper—and that box becomes a game-changer yet again.



The portion of inmates who will have participated in job-training programs, etc. by the date of their release is small, and continuously shrinking. A former official at the Department of Justice spoke in October about the cuts to funding for such programs, leaving "more than 10,000 inmates on a waiting list for prison jobs and educational training," many of whom leave prison without even the ability to read.¹ Surely their prospects of finding employment post-prison are nigh-impossible. Despite the

loss of funding for educational or other training programs, some efforts have been made to assist former inmates in transitioning back into civil society. During the last year of his term, the Obama Administration plans to focus on prison reform; in early November 2015 the White House published a list of actions the President hopes to implement before leaving office. These steps include grants from the Department of Education, promoting public safety and economic opportunity through the Federal Interagency Reentry Council, establishing a National Clean Slate Clearinghouse through the Departments of Labor and Justice to help provide legal aid and record-clearing or sealing services, and updating policies for Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)-sponsored housing.

Among the initiatives, the President's top priority is to "ban the box," referring to legislation presently before Congress that would remove the checkboxes asking about federal prisoner status from applications for all federal government jobs, including hiring by federal contractors. In the meantime, President Obama is urging hirers to wait to bring up conversations about a person's history of conviction until later in the application process.² Speaking at Rutgers University in November, President Obama expressed his belief that the federal government "should not use criminal history to screen out applicants before we even look at their qualifications."³

Growing research supports reentry programs' efforts: helping the previously incarcerated find employment lowers rates of recidivism as well as overall crime rates. Those who work closely with inmates or former inmates in reentry programs witness such improvements firsthand. Reentry program leaders, as well as other leaders in labor rights groups, understand that "returning citizens who find jobs are far more likely to stay out of prison," and further express that America "can't rebuild families and communities destroyed by incarceration if people who leave prison end up right back behind bars when they are released. Banning the box is an essential step to reducing incarceration rates in the United States."⁴

A study by the Vera Institute of Justice found that "effective reentry planning begins by preparing people for release as soon as they enter prison, using a thorough screening instrument that helps staff identify priority areas for intervention and develop case management plans." The

study cites Hawaii as a successful case; Hawaii's Opportunity Probation with Enforcement (HOPE) has helped keep prior offenders out of prison by not re-arresting offenders who break administrative rules of their probation or parole requirements. Instead, smaller consequences—a few days in jail for failed drug tests and other violations—have both lessened instances of reoffending, and also helped keep numerous people out of prison.⁵



If the humanitarian appeal isn't convincing enough to help resettle prior offenders, the economics of the prison system are additionally motivational. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities reported in April that 4% of each state's budget—averaging \$49 billion—is spent on Corrections, including prisons, juvenile justice programs, parole, and

other corrections programs.⁶ The Vera Institute of Justice dissected this figure in its study of taxpayer money spent on the U.S. prison system, using 2010 data from 40 participatory states. The study found that the total per-inmate cost averaged \$31,286, but was as high as \$60,076 in one state. The Vera Institute of Justice also discovered that "more than four in 10 prisoners return to custody within three years of release,"

which further contributes to prison costs in America.⁷ It seems that our tax dollars might be better used to help returning citizens adapt to society, rather than paying to arrest and incarcerate them time after time.

At this time of resolutions, let us not forget about those among us who face an arduous path to achieving their new beginnings.

¹ Horwitz, Sari. "U.S. Official laments cut in prison job-training effort." *The Washington Post* 30 Oct. 2015: A3. *Factiva, Inc.*. Web. 5 Nov. 2015.

² "FACT SHEET: President Obama Announces New Actions to Promote Rehabilitation and Reintegration for the Formerly- Incarcerated." *The White House: Office of the Press Secretary*. Office of the Press Secretary, 2 Nov. 2015. Web. 25 Nov. 2015.

³ Edney, Hazel T. "President Obama backs 'ban the box' to help ex-cons get jobs." *U-Wire* 22 Nov. 2015 [*Washington, D.C.*] *.Factiva, Inc.*. Web. 25 Nov. 2015.

⁴ Edney, "President Obama backs 'ban the box'."

⁵ Delaney, Ruth, and Christian Henrichson. "The Price of Prisons: What Incarceration Costs Taxpayers." *VERA*. VERA Institute of Justice, 20 July 2012. Web. 27 Nov. 2015.

⁶ "Where Do Our State Tax Dollars Go?" *Policy Basics*. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 14 Apr. 2015. Web. 27 Nov. 2015.

⁷ Delaney and Henrichson, "The Price of Prisons."

Image Source:

Crowe, JD. "5-27PrisonReform." *AL.com*. <<http://connect.al.com/staff/jcrowe/photos.html>>