



Reintegration and Collateral Sanctions

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Good afternoon.

And thank you for that thundering round of applause. Appreciate being here among my friends and colleagues, and sharing on the subject of reentry and collateral sanctions. I've been blessed to have been engaged in the ministry to the incarcerated, formerly incarcerated, and their families now since 1982. Since 1992, my focus has for the most part been in the area of reentry, and I believe that having a perspective on this work that spans some 35 years is useful for the conversation that we're having today on mass incarceration.

My work in this area began before the effects of mass incarceration were felt in the area of reentry. I have close up and personal seen the unfolding of mass incarceration and the devastating impact that it has had on our community, especially on communities of color. Prior to the passing of the Second Chance Act in 2008 there were only a handful of us around the country who were engaged in ministry to the incarcerated, helping them to successfully reintegrate back into society. Most of us were from the faith-based community. There were few who even recognized that there was a need to provide this kind of services to people who were leaving the prison system.

As the prison population exploded, however, as a result of mass incarceration, and hundreds of thousands of individuals began to return to communities, more people saw the need for reentry services. Today there's general agreement that these types of services are needed because for all the talk about locking people up and throw away the key, the truth is that 95% of the, I'm sorry, 2.3 million people who are in prison today will one day be released to the community. Annually, that amounts to about 630,000 people released from prison. About 67% of those who are released will return to prison within two years. This high recidivism rate is a major driver in the high rate of incarceration in this country, and it ensures that the prisons stay full. Some people may not be given life sentences, but because of the high recidivism rate, end up serving life on the installment plan.

Since the explosion of the prison population was not caused by an increase in crime and criminals, it stands to reason that many of those who fill our prisons today are not career

criminals. They are vulnerable people on the fringes of society who got swept into the prison system. A good number of them today have substance abuse and mental health problems. Many have low education levels. Some have little or no experience in the workforce. They have serious life management challenges that caused them to run a file of the law.

I gradually began to notice that those people who I served in more recent years in reentry were significantly different from those who I served in the early years. I began to realize gradually that they were different from me and my contemporaries who served time in prison and were released prior to the advent of mass incarceration. Many are not criminals per se, but have a significant number of deficits that made them fodder for the prison system, and because of the type of people who are housed in prisons today, reentry service providers must be prepared to offer a variety of services and supports. The best programs are comprehensive in nature. They include the delivery of evidence-based programming.

Now, making the transition from prison to the community has never been easy, but it is particularly difficult during the age of mass incarceration. Because of the routine practice of waiving the rights of juveniles and trying them as adults, many people end up entering the prison system in their teens, and because of judges and prosecutors routinely sentencing people to very long sentences, it's not unusual to find that a person is leaving prison in their late 30s or early 40s and have spent 25, 20 years in prison and they have no experience in life management issues, including finding and obtaining a job. Because of prison overcrowding, prisoners for the most part are warehoused in prisons today.

There are very few, if any, programs that are designed to help people be more functional once they're released from prison. There's not a whole lot done in the area of substance abuse and mental health, and as a result, people are actually released from prison today worse off than when they went in, and when a person is released from prison in this country today their punishment continues.

The final and perhaps most devastating aspect of a felony begins once a person is released from prison. They face numerous laws, policies, and practices that limit their ability to function as full citizens in their communities. These laws and policies are called collateral sanctions, and for instance, there's a host of occupations that people with felony convictions are restricted from participating in for the rest of their lives. Political sanctions strip people of their civil rights such as voting and participating on juries. Because of collateral sanctions, everyone convicted of a felony in this country ends up serving a virtual life sentence.

Just spoke to a woman just last week, back in my hometown of Detroit, who had had a felony 30 years ago. She didn't go to prison, but she had a felony, and this woman was active in the community for decades serving the poor. She was a well-educated woman. She had received a degree in divinity, and thought that she would like to serve as a hospital chaplain. She applied at a hospital and they liked her credentials, they were aware of her background, and they offered her a position, but she got a call a few days later informing her that her invitation for employment was rescinded because the hospital does not hire people with felonies.

These collateral sanctions make it difficult for people to successfully transition back into society and keeps the recidivism rate in this country high. One thing that has become clear is that delivering reentry services from a human service perspective is not cheap. Federal agencies usually allow between 6 and \$10,000 of services to provide to a person who leaves prison, so for a program that annually serves about 300 people, their budget could be as high as \$3 million. While that is a drop in the bucket compared to \$10 million that would be spent to keep this same group incarcerated for only a year, government funders and other funders are not enthusiastic about spending this kind of money on reentry services, so the vast majority of people do not receive reentry services after they are released from prison.

Mapping studies have found that most of the people who are in prison come from and are returning to the largest cities in a given state. Most of them return to just a handful of zip codes within those cities. For instance, the Illinois Department of Corrections in 2013 released 30,000 people from prison. That's a lot of people. You guys have a very large prison system here. 20,000 of those returned to the City of Chicago. Most of those returned to the West side and the South side. In one zip code, 60608, on the West side of Chicago, where my relatives lives, nearly 1,600 people were released from prison in one year. These are neighborhoods with high rates of crime, high unemployment, inadequate housing, failing schools.

In most incidents, the needs of the current residents are not being met, so how much more difficult is it for the returning citizens to find the resources and support they need to successfully reintegrate back into society? These are tremendous challenges that people face trying to successfully reintegrate back into society. Some people wonder why the recidivism rate in this country is so high, but I think it's a miracle that anyone is able to get out of prison and successfully reintegrate back into society under these kind of conditions, especially in cities like Chicago and New York and Los Angeles where the cost of living is so high.

People say to me, "This is terrible, Brother Jo. The government should do something about this." And yes, I agree that governments should play a role in solving the problems that it created, but my experience has taught me that if we wait on government to solve the problem, it will never be solved. Brother Glenn Martin, who will speak later on today, will tell you that those who are closest to the problem are best able to address the problem, but this is a problem that all of us in the community should be concerned about and attempt to address, especially those who are in the faith-based communities.

In my opinion, reentry services epitomize ... we talked about Matthew 25. The reentry services epitomize the spirit of Matthew 25 like no other ministry, where Jesus says that, "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you invited me in. I needed clothes and you clothed me. I was sick and you looked after me. I was in prison and you came and visited me." And they said, "When did we do all of that, Jesus?" He says, "When you have done it to least of these, my returning citizens, you have done it onto me."

We need to show this kind of love and support to our returning citizens, but you know, sadly, when I hear Christians often quote that passage of scripture, they leave off the last part. They leave off the part about, "I was in prison and you visited me," but we need to be better than that as Christians today. We need to do better than that. Let's resolve from this point forward that we will do better for those who are in prison and in transition from prison. Thank you.