

SHARING THE BURDEN OF REPAIR:

REENTRY AFTER MASS INCARCERATION



In these questions we often emphasize good faith listening because the criminal justice system, although it claims to presume innocence, in practice often does the opposite, working from a presumption of suspicion. To us good faith listening means presuming that the person who is talking to you is speaking their truth, however different it may appear to be from your own, and responding to them with equal authenticity.

INTRODUCTION – What If?

1. The authors describe how they became interested in the subject of reentry. What made you want to explore this challenging subject more closely?
2. The authors described their interest in reentry as growing from a series of personal experiences that inspired a series of questions. What happens when you describe your own developing interest in the form of experiences compared to describing it in terms of beliefs? As you read, are you giving yourself permission to have your ideas and emotional responses change as you listen in good faith to different stories, identify with different people in those stories? If not, can you identify what's causing your hesitation or reluctance?

SECTION I: BY THEIR OWN RECKONING

1. Which of the topics in these ten chapters speak most to you? Which of the individual stories resonate most? Which are the most difficult for you to listen to in good faith?
2. What does it mean to focus on desistance signaling when listening to a reentry story? What are some of the factors that you feel are most closely linked to desistance (*e.g. relationships, age, finding work*)? What signs made you feel that people would be able to not commit another crime in the future? Can you identify places in these stories where someone in the community or in a position of power within the criminal justice system validated a desire to change?
3. Some of the juveniles who were tried as adults and sent to prison at very early ages had intensely traumatic childhoods (for examples, Nier and Anthony). How did prison exacerbate those early traumas? Which of the ways these individuals tried to address those challenges spoke most to you?
4. How do these men and women describe constructive adulthood? Are their criteria very different from the ones you use? Are they similar? What obstacles stand in the way of their meeting these goals? What is the role of religion/fait h in their ability to change?
5. When you see the term collateral consequences, what does this mean to you? What are your thoughts on Omar having to register as a sex offender although he was convicted of murder and robbery?

6. How many of the obstacles people face in their reentry are constructed by the broader society—for example, hiring and housing restrictions? Are there some understandable reasons why we are setting up these obstacles? Have we named those reasons clearly to ourselves—and also identified a path to reentry that meets them? For example, how many years after incarceration and release would it take for it to feel safe to rent to someone with a criminal record? To hire them?
7. Was there anything in these stories that surprised you? Were there themes you heard across many of the stories that you feel were important and the authors didn't identify? That the individuals sharing their stories didn't identify?
8. How much do the nature of the crime, the sex of the person committing it, the age at which it was committed, the length of the sentences, the conditions of incarceration affect what you look for as trustworthy change on the part of the individual reentering? Does the length of time someone was incarcerated make them, in your mind, more or less trustworthy when they are released? Why?
9. How much do we hold the individual accountable for systemic factors like poverty, poor parenting, inadequate education, unsafe neighborhoods, when we are evaluating their trustworthiness? How much causality do we ascribe to individual will? How different is our understanding from that of the individual sharing their story?
10. After reading these stories, do you have a different picture of people who have gone to prison than when you began? Do you find yourself thinking differently about signals of desistance and how you might validate them? Which of these individuals would you be likely to hire, welcome as a neighbor, welcome into your church, enjoy as a friend? Would it be easier to do so not knowing about their criminal behavior? Would learning about their criminal record later greatly change your evaluation of their trustworthiness? Would you be comfortable encouraging other members of your community to welcome former inmates?

SECTION II: THE BROADER CONTEXT:

MASS INCARCERATION IN NUMBERS

1. Why do you think the U.S. has such a disproportionately high incarceration rate compared to all other developed countries?
2. Why do you think Georgia has one of the highest incarceration rates in the U.S? Why does it have such a large community supervision rate?
3. How much does the clear racial disproportion of mass incarceration affect how you think about mass incarceration in general?
4. Of the evidence presented in this chapter what did you find most troubling? Most surprising?.
5. What are the most important conclusions that you reach for yourself from the evidence covered in this chapter? What evidence not presented in this chapter would you like to see?

SECTION III: COMMUNITY SUPERVISION

1. Are there particular officers whose perspective resonated with you? Surprised you? What qualities in particular did you think made them effective as supervision officers?
2. What can we learn from the experiences of community supervision officers that will help us clarify our own responses to people who are reentering? Can we as a society comfortably make a commitment to side with success? What in the stories in the section make you feel that this would be easier than you imagined? More difficult?
3. Are our expectations of someone under community supervision higher than our expectations of someone in prison? How does thinking about desistance signaling affect how you might respond to someone under community supervision? What would you be looking for?
4. Do the proposed probation and parole reforms presented here adequately meet the challenges of community supervision in Georgia? How do politics affect reform?
5. Do you know how the ratio of people under community supervision to people incarcerated has changed in your state in the last few years? Do you know the average length of time people in your state serve under probation or parole?
6. Can community supervision, however caring, be expected to compensate for years of imprisonment with few rehabilitative services?
7. Do you think it necessary for parole officers to be armed?

SECTION IV: HOLDING COMMUNITIES

Chapter 1: Families

1. Which stories in this chapter resonated with you most? Were there any stories that made you feel uncomfortable? Why?
2. When reading about family relationships, does anything shift in your understanding of the individual who was incarcerated? In your understanding of the significance of the crime? The challenge of reentry for the whole family? Do you think your interpretations would be different if the person returning was your own family member or friend?
3. What are some of the collateral consequences families bear when a family member is incarcerated? When that family member returns? Which of these consequences feel fair to you? Which do not? How would you feel about assuming these consequences if a family member of yours went to prison? How many of these collateral consequences are we as communities responsible for?

Chapter 2: Peer Reentry Support Groups

1. What do you see as the particular strengths of peer support for reentry? Limitations? Can it, by itself, provide enough support for real reintegration or are other perspectives needed?
2. Two individuals described in this chapter, Sabree and Horne, have dedicated a large part of their lives to helping people who are or have been incarcerated. They play an important bridging role with the larger community for members of PIIC. What are some of the most important dimensions of that bridging role? What is necessary for bridging to be successful?
3. In what contexts do you feel you would be most comfortable playing a bridging role? As one of the few people in a peer group who have not been incarcerated or as a welcoming person in a group where few if any have been incarcerated? Would you speak differently about reentry, the responsibilities of the community, the responsibilities of the person reentering in these different contexts? Which context would make you most generous and accepting? Raise the most doubts for you?

Chapter 3: Faith Communities

1. Like Sabree and Horne, the three faith leaders in this chapter minister to people at different points on their journey—while incarcerated and/or on release. Each of them provides different resources for people along with spiritual support—art, education, community support, employment, legal aid. Are there particular dimensions of each person's approach that you feel are more effective than others? Could these approaches be expanded beyond a faith context? Are there differences in how they model in their own behavior what reintegration looks like?
2. Does the offering of resources within a religious framework make it safer for community members to offer support?

Chapter 4: Reentry Housing

1. For the men we meet in this chapter, what were some of the realities of reentry they were finding most challenging? How realistic were their expectations on release?
2. Would you be comfortable having this reentry housing in your own neighborhood? If not, what specifically would be your objections?

Chapter 5: Community-Based Reentry Programs

1. BASICS: Menifee suggests that there are three things that are crucial for helping people reenter successfully: Receiving some basic tools for economic survival, which includes a social justice-based lesson in economic empowerment; reminding people that they are special; and that they feel humbled by the harm they have done. Do these feel of equal importance to you? Do any of them feel incongruent? Is the list incomplete?

2. Carrollton Re-Entry Coalition: The members of the Carrollton Re-Entry Coalition understand their work on reentry through a social justice lens and consider mass incarceration as the central civil rights issue of our time. Do you share this perspective? If not, what do you think is?
3. They also discuss big differences in attitudes within the black community, especially the religious community, towards people who have been involved in the criminal justice system. How do your own feelings and behaviors embody some of these same contradictions?
4. The Carrollton Re-Entry Coalition often found itself stepping in when Corrections released people in ways that were unsafe for the person being released and for the broader community—for example without medications or housing. Do you think volunteer groups should be responsible for making sure that someone has the basic necessities for survival on release? If not, who should be?

Chapter 6: Transition Centers & Early Employment

1. Do you think transition centers should be available to everyone leaving prison? Are you willing to pay higher taxes to provide such services? Do you think that those who are most likely to succeed at reentry should have priority if space is limited? Or should those spaces go to people who are most likely to have difficulty with reentry?
2. The jobs most people work at when in transition centers are poorly paid and often physically demanding. Does creating a transitional center whose purpose includes providing workers for one of these employers feel mutually advantageous or exploitive?
3. Which of these employers do you feel was most successful in helping people move from reentry to reintegration? How? Why?

SECTION V: PUZZLE PIECES OF REFORM

These chapters invite us to learn more about the criminal justice system as a whole, especially in our own state.

Chapter 1: Prosecutors

1. Do you know where your local district attorney stands on mandatory minimums, prosecuting juveniles as adults, seeking the death penalty, prosecuting police officers, number of plea deals versus trials, use of accountability courts, probation, and other alternatives to incarceration? What are your views?
2. Have you observed trials in your county? If so, what strikes you as needing change?
3. Should prosecutors be required to occasionally serve as public defenders? If they did, what results would you anticipate? What would be the benefit?

Chapter 2: Juvenile Justice

1. Do you know the racial breakdown of referrals, arrests, charges and convictions for juveniles in your county, state?

2. Do you know the range of community-based treatment options available for delinquent youth in your city or county? What are your thoughts on diversion programs?
3. Many of the people working in the most progressive courts were clear that the youth and the families they worked with were unaware of the lengths the courts were going to keep juveniles out of the juvenile prison system. They were also clear that they felt the effort, even unseen, was worth it. If you were doing this work, do you think you would be as clear about its value?
4. How much social responsibility do we have as a society for making guns broadly available to juveniles?
5. Should we, if we are thinking about reentry at every step of the process, insist that the people responsible for the youngest and most vulnerable of offenders be the most highly trained in the corrections system—from administrators to guards—since success at this point has the most lasting impact for us as a society? Are you willing to pay higher taxes for this purpose?

Chapter 3: Accountability Courts

1. Should people who are caught using illegal substances be handled through the criminal justice system or through social services (if at all)? What if their behavior is clearly addictive? How about sellers of small quantities of marijuana? Of harder drugs?
2. If an addicted person or one with serious mental health issues has committed a non-drug related crime (such as robbery or burglary) should this remain a public health rather than criminal justice issue? Under the accountability court model, with the successful completion of the program the offender's charge is eliminated. However, if they fail, the charge and sentence remain. Does this seem appropriate to you? Why or why not?
3. If you think that crime with clear addictive or mental health roots should be handled as a public health rather than criminal justice issue, what about crimes whose roots are broader social conditions like poverty, lack of education, or stage of development—like youth?

Chapter 4: Corrections

1. Do you know the recidivism rates in your state? The number of people incarcerated? What proportion they are of the general population?
2. The commissioners who shared their thoughts on prison reform are describing what they think would be a more effective system. Are they also describing, in your opinion, a more just system? How would you describe the difference in their emphases? What does that tell you about what they think contributes to desistance? About root causes of criminal behavior? About what they see the purpose of prison to be?
3. Owens description of the conditions of SMUs in Georgia prisons differs dramatically from the psychologist Haney's description of the same facilities. Granting they are both speaking in good faith, how do you reconcile the differences in their perspectives?

Chapter 5: Criminal Justice Reform

1. Many people argue that in recent decades the United States has incarcerated too many people and for too long, especially when compared to our recent past as well as other countries. Do you agree? If so, what are the major changes that you would support?
2. During the same "tough on crime" era many states reduced rehabilitative services for the incarcerated. Would you be willing to pay higher taxes to support greater rehabilitative services? To provide higher salaries for better educated and trained personnel?
3. What policy changes (for examples, mandatory minimums, record restriction, increased clemency through expanded parole, paying and credentialing prisoners for the work they voluntarily do in prison) do you believe are the most important to better promote the effective reintegration of the formerly incarcerated?
4. Do you know who the most influential actors are in your state in terms of criminal justice policy and reform? Have you researched individuals running for law-enforcement and judicial positions?

SECTION VI: REVISIONING JUSTICE

1. As a society, we want to feel that when people return from prison they are safer and more trustworthy for us than when they went in. For people returning from prison, they want their time in captivity to count toward something. What are your own criteria for trustworthiness for someone reentering after incarceration? Your trustworthiness criteria for common citizens like us who bear some responsibility for mass incarceration? For the institutions directly involved in mass incarceration—from legislatures to prosecutors, judges, departments of corrections and parole? Would you feel comfortable clearly articulating these criteria for trustworthiness to someone reentering, to a prison guard, to a police officer, to a judge, a commissioner of corrections? Do you feel that at this time you meet your own criteria for trustworthiness?
2. How does committing to good faith listening affect how you understand motivations and their relationship to consequences and accountability? For example, if marked racial disparity is a consequence but not the intent of a given law (for example the law against crack cocaine), what level of accountability does the society that tolerated that law bear for the increased harm that law has caused to already vulnerable populations?
3. How does the reality of mass incarceration affect how you assess individual and social accountability? How does it change your understanding of justice?
4. Are there parts of the criminal justice system that you as a citizen are more willing to own than others? Are you willing to own prisons? Are you willing to own the absence of them? Are you willing to own redistributing resources between police and social services? Are you willing to own unforeseen racial disparities of criminal laws?

5. What does it mean to have people who have experienced incarceration evaluate its effectiveness according to core prosocial expectations such as self-sufficiency, care for others, civic participation? What would it mean to have that evaluation lead to real changes in practice?
6. Would you be willing to experience, even briefly, the conditions that people in your state experience in your prisons and jails?
7. Are there crimes you feel can never be forgiven? By the victim? By society?
8. Having read this book, what questions might you ask of someone with a criminal record if you were considering hiring them, renting to them, having them join your neighborhood association, having your children play together?

SHARING THE BURDEN OF REPAIR

REENTRY AFTER MASS INCARCERATION

A Wising Up Listening Project

Heather Tosteson & Charles D. Brockett

Copyright © 2020 by Wising Up Press

ISBN: 978-1-7324514-5-2



OTHER BOOKS OF INTEREST FROM WISING UP PRESS

WISING UP ANTHOLOGIES

RE-CREATING OUR COMMON CHORD

CROSSING CLASS: *The Invisible Wall*

THE KINDNESS OF STRANGERS

DARING TO REPAIR:

What Is It, Who Does It & Why?

SHIFTING BALANCE SHEETS:

Women's Stories of Naturalized Citizenship & Cultural Attachment

COMPLEX ALLEGIANCES:

Constellations of Immigration, Citizenship, & Belonging

WISING UP LISTENING PROJECTS

GOD SPEAKS MY LANGUAGE, CAN YOU?

Heather Tosteson



Wising Up Press

P.O. Box 2122

Decatur, GA 30031-2122

www.universaltable.org

404-276-6046