

LONG ROAD BACK

EX-OFFENDERS' STRUGGLE FOR ACCEPTANCE

STORIES OF EX-OFFENDERS AND FAITH COMMUNITY RESPONSE

Long Road Back: Ex-offenders' Struggle for Acceptance is a documentary from Third Way Media examining the difficulties ex-offenders encounter as they try to find their place in society. It aired on NBC-TV under the aegis of the Interfaith Broadcasting Commission. Produced by Burton Buller, this program seeks to lower stigma thereby opening new opportunities for support groups and employment.

“Why not teach the skill that people need in order to reduce recidivism instead of making prison an industrial complex and a revolving door?” - Jennie Amison, Gemeinschaft Home

With the highest incarceration rate in the world, the United States holds over two million people in its prisons each year. More than half a million ex-offenders are released back into society annually. When released, many are given only \$25 and a one-way bus ticket.

Long Road Back follows several ex-offenders as they encounter pain, alienation and hardship and experience stigma and difficulties as they try to put their lives and families back together after serving a prison term.

WHY THIS DOCUMENTARY?

Prisons are filled to overflowing. Some house twice as many prisoners than they were designed for. The courts continue to sentence offenders, exacerbating an already dire situation.

Skyrocketing costs to house all these prisoners affects everyone. States must spend more of their budgets each year on prison facilities and staffing, leaving less for addressing other social issues and necessary infrastructure maintenance and improvements. Roads, education, and other services society needs to function get shortchanged.

There's another aspect to our penchant for imprisonment. Few prisoners spend their lives in prison. Most of those we incarcerate are released back into society at some point. Nearly three quarters of a million ex-offenders try their luck at returning to their local communities each year. About two thirds don't make it, and end up back in prison within three years. Those that do make it do so with a combination of luck, determination, and support services provided by their local communities.

“Keeping people incarcerated for longer amounts of time is something we can't afford anymore.”
Dr. Donna Boone, Virginia Department of Corrections.

Obstacles to Re-entry

When a person leaves prison, they face a myriad of obstacles. Prison normally does not provide a nurturing environment in which social skills so necessary for living together in a community are honed. Rather, anti-social behavior necessary for survival in prison must be overcome. If the offender entered prison early in life, spending many years behind bars, they likely have not experienced problem-solving skills usually formulated in their late teens and early twenties. Many face serious problems when faced with having to manage money.

But before they have money to manage, they need to find employment. Employment is the Holy Grail for successful re-entry. Everything one needs to successfully live on the outside depends on having a job. But employment is probably the hardest obstacle to overcome.

“...People don’t like to hire ex-cons. They make the assumption that you’re dishonest, that you’re dangerous, in many cases. I have a pretty solid post-secondary education ... a couple of degrees and I couldn’t get anyone to take my resume. They saw my name on a resume, they handed it back to me. There wasn’t a single job offer out there.” Klaus, ex-offender, bank robbery.

Some jobs are simply closed to offenders. Drug offenders are not likely to get jobs in the medical field. Those convicted of fraud will likely not get jobs in the banking industry. In fact, they may even be denied a bank account. And so the list goes. Nearly all jobs available to ex-offenders offer minimum wages. With such a wage, affordable housing is very difficult to find. When found, what’s left from a paycheck hardly buys life’s necessities.

Without an adequate job and affordable housing, an ex-offender is almost certain to return to prison.

Stigma

Stigma arises for many different reasons. Fear appears to be a major factor. When we meet an ex-offender, lots of questions pop to the surface.

- Was this person imprisoned for a violent crime? If so, am I in danger of further violence? Can I trust my family to be around this person?
- If this person was imprisoned, it must mean that this person is dangerous in some way. Can I trust such a person to get close to me? To know where I live? To know my family? To be alone with my young son or daughter?"

These, and many more fears, cause us to distance ourselves from ex-offenders. Over time, trust may be earned. But trust requires us to opening up ourselves.

The great irony is that the greatest fear offenders face is leaving prison to return to their communities. As one offender notes, “I was scared at first because I thought, “Oh wow, what if these people try to kill me, what if these people hold my crime against me.” Offenders know that when they leave prison, they will be facing almost insurmountable odds in finding employment, housing, dependable friends, and a place in society.

For most of us, finding a place in society relates primarily to how we fare in the employment sector. We are limited by our own ambitions and values, our education and our performance. An ex-offender encounters all these limitations, plus the stigma that will create barriers for a lifetime.

“...basically I’m still doing time, just in a different way, you know. And I want people to realize that once you get in trouble, it’s just like it follows you for the rest of your life.” Jamie, ex-offender, second degree murder

“...society stigmatizes you when you when you leave prison, they brand you, you’re an ex-con. And there’s nothing you can do to change that. You can’t hide from it, you can’t you can’t you can’t go through your life in in sackcloth and ashes, apologizing to everyone you meet. That doesn’t do any good at all.” Klaus, ex-offender, bank robbery

Resources

[The National Reentry Resource Center](#)

See the FAQ section for a series of FAQs that address key issues related to reentry. Also new on this site, a series of Reentry Mythbusters.

[Mental Illness and the Criminal Justice System](#)

[Dealing with the Criminal Justice System](#) (posted by National Alliance on Mental Illness)

[TIME magazine](#), De-Criminalizing Mental Illness

[U.S. Dept. of Justice, Prison Statistics](#)

AGENCIES IN DOCUMENTARY

[Atlanta Enterprise Center](#)

[The RASE Project](#)

[Gemeinschaft Home](#)

LONG ROAD BACK — DISCUSSION GUIDE

Introduction

Preparation. Preview the program before showing it to a group. We encourage you to watch the program in its entirety before discussing. (And don’t miss the update on the lives of those in the program after the credit roll.) Use the guide for discussion with small groups, religious education classes, workshops, conferences or support groups. Choose the questions that work best for your group.

The United States is on an incarceration course that correction officials say is unsustainable. Not only does the U.S. incarcerate more people than any nation on earth, it incarcerates a greater number per capita than any other nation.

Meanwhile the cost of keeping people behind bars is skyrocketing. Greater and greater percentages of declining state budgets are being plowed into maintaining and expanding prison systems. California currently spends nearly as much on its prisons as it does on its educational system.

To ease the congestion in prisons that often house twice as many prisoners than they were designed for, some prisoners are experiencing early release. Yet, the number of incoming prisoners continues to far exceed those being released.

The expanding prison population is also expanding the number of ex-offenders released back into society. About 650,000 prisoners re-enter local communities each year. Those returning often find it easier to return to prison than to face the stigma and isolation they face upon re-entering their communities. Without community services that assist in the re-entry process, it is almost certain that an ex-offender will return to prison.

Long Road Back: Ex-Offenders' Struggle for Acceptance exposes some of the difficulties ex-offenders face in finding jobs, finding their place in the social order, and obtaining housing and medical services. Those on the outside often fear encounters with ex-offenders. Meanwhile, ex-offenders experience fear as their release dates near.

This program seeks to reduce the fear and stigma associated with re-entry. It will take the involvement of church and civic groups, local governments and service boards working together to increase the successful re-entry of ex-offenders into society.

STUDY GUIDE

General questions

1. What comments did the offenders make that stuck with you? Why? What surprised you in this documentary? Is there anything that made you angry?
2. Several people in the documentary talked about it being easier to live in prison than on the outside. From what you heard in the program, why do you think this is true?
3. Jamie's story reflects a vicious cycle, familiar to many ex-offenders. She says you can't start over because your criminal past follows you. How do you think Jamie and others like her can break out of this cycle? Is it ever possible?
4. Klaus said that institutionalization hardens you to things like seeing others die. How do you think this affects life on the outside after being incarcerated?
5. Klaus comments that "you're your own worst enemy" when you're behind bars. What do you think that means?

Ex-offenders and society

1. Statistics show that two-thirds of those released will return to jail. What can the church and society do to keep people from going back to jail?
2. We refer to a jail term as "paying a debt to society." Do we ever actually view the debt as paid? Does society owe people a second chance?
3. How can trust be rebuilt for a person who has spent time incarcerated?
4. What can the church community do?
5. Jamie chose not to relate to the church that had been supporting her during her incarceration. What does it mean for a congregation to spend time and effort relating to someone in prison without an ongoing relationship after prison?
6. What are ideas for ways a congregation can support ex-offenders?

7. What can we learn about spirituality from Jamie? How does one's view of God change in different life circumstances?
8. Discuss the impact of imprisonment on family members. How can the church family support those who are left behind when a family member goes to jail? How can they be supportive of the family members when the person is released?

Community

Hebrews 13:3 says "Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering." (NIV)

1. How can congregations carry this verse one step further, to "remember those who have been in prison, as if you had been in prison yourself"? What can your community do?
2. What re-entry programs are available in your community? What do you know about them? How can you support such programs?
3. "I've had a million doors slammed in my face," says Anthony. "They say forget the past, but they walk around with picks and shovels and dig it up." How can business persons in your community be encouraged to give ex-offenders a chance at jobs in their companies?
4. Do you have any experiences with hiring ex-offenders? Were they positive or negative? What are the problems for an employer when the decision is made to hire an ex-offender? What are the problems for the other employees? What are the difficulties that the ex-offender faces?

Ex-offenders and mental illness

1. Nearly 300,000 inmates are identified as having a mental illness. By default, prisons have become America's mental institutions. Yet, prisons generally have inadequate or no resources to help the mentally ill. How does a mental illness feed into the cycle of despair that is often part of re-entry?
2. How does lack of medical insurance affect those dealing with life as an ex-offender on top of needing medication for mental illnesses?

Programs making a difference

1. The Gemeinschaft director comments that it is more expensive to keep people in jail than it is to provide support programs for ex-offenders. Why do think then, that states are so unwilling to support re-entry programs?
2. The RASE House in Harrisburg, Pa. provides transitional living for women. What kinds of skills were they learning? How can living together in this kind of supportive environment be especially helpful to women who have lost their children to the welfare system, among other shared realities?
3. What makes the Atlanta Enterprise Center in Atlanta effective? Why is it important for men to have realistic expectations for jobs?

Wrap up

1. Where do you see signs of hope regarding this topic?

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