

ABPsi POLICY BRIEF:

Disproportionate Incarceration and an Inadequate Reentry Policy:

A Call to Action

THE ISSUE:

The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the industrialized world.¹ African Americans are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system and their massive incarceration has had a devastating impact on families and communities.² Mass incarceration has resulted in a large number of collateral consequences that have affected family members financially and emotionally and created social risks for vulnerable children.³ A large number of offenders are incarcerated at great distances from their homes, thus making it difficult to maintain familial contact.⁴ Many prisons in the U.S. are overcrowded and do not provide rehabilitative services to those incarcerated. Many offenders return to society with little employment history and poor job opportunities, in need of education, inadequate to no housing, substance abuse issues, and many medical concerns. The reentry of nearly 700,000 citizens to America's communities, many of them African American, is not adequately addressed by appropriate programs resulting in poverty, homelessness, unemployment, substance abuse, poor medical and mental health, and in far too many instances a return to prison.⁵ Public policy ensuring the addressing of needs of offenders beginning with sufficient reintegration programming, job readiness, educational preparation and other deficits is needed. This will reduce recidivism, improve families, communities, increase employment opportunities, and support public safety. Without effective reentry programs, those returning from incarceration become

“churners” and return to prison in less than three years by a parole/probation violation or new arrest.⁶

BACKGROUND:

The massive prison growth in America can be traced to the popular opinion of many citizens and changes in public policy. During nearly four decades beginning in the late 1960's, society's opinions, laws, and judges' rulings changed. This in large part can be attributed to a “get tough on crime” political slogan adopted during the Richard Nixon presidential campaign and later in the failed “war on drugs.” First, came sentencing reform at the state level stimulated by political promises from politicians to get tough on crime. Some of the policies adopted included “three strikes” laws, mandatory minimum sentencing guidelines, truth in sentencing, and sex offender registration. As a result, incarceration rates skyrocketed.⁷ Drug arrests have been responsible in large part for the massive increase in the prison population. Drug arrests spiked significantly beginning in 1980. There were 581,000 arrests for drug offenses in 1980 and that number reached 1,476,000 by 1995. Drug arrests have remained steady at about one million per year since 1996.⁸ The prison population has continued to climb, though crime statistics indicate crime is declining. The continued prison growth can be attributed to the lack of effective reentry programs since approximately 33% of new admissions to prisons each year are parole or probation violators; many for testing positive for illicit drugs.⁹

No group has been as devastated by America's incarceration policies more than African Americans, particularly African American males. The incarceration policies of the U. S. have had a negative impact on family structure, employment, economics, and parenting in the black community. Approximately one and a half million children have a parent in

prison. Of these children, 125,000 have a mother in jail or prison. This is particularly true for African Americans where one in 14 African American children have a parent in jail or prison. Most parents are incarcerated more than 100 miles from their children. This increases the likelihood that there will be little to no visitation during the time that parent is incarcerated.¹⁰

THE IMPACT:

In 1972, approximately 200,000 individuals were incarcerated in the United States. As a result of massive prison growth, the Bureau of Justice Statistics reports there are more than 2,304,115 individuals incarcerated in U. S. prisons and jails in 2010. This represents an incarceration rate of 754 inmates per 100,000 American citizens; the highest incarceration rate in the world. The incarceration rate for African American males is an astounding 4,831 per 100,000 or approximately seven times the national average.¹¹

The nearly 40 year period of unprecedented incarceration growth finds that in 2010, more than 7.3 million individuals were on probation, parole, in jail, or in prison. This translates to 3.2% of all U. S. residents or approximately 1 in 31 adults are in some manner involved in the American criminal justice system.¹²

As a result of prison growth over the last 40 years, nearly as many African Americans (2,166,000) as whites (2,203,000) have served time in prison. This is particularly disturbing since African Americans are less than 13% of the American population. The rate of ever having been-incarcerated for African American males was 16.6% in 2001 and only 2.6% for whites. In 2001, 22% or just slightly more than one in five black males between the ages 35-44 had been incarcerated. This compares with 3.5% of white males in the same age group. If incarceration rates continue at the same pace, it is predicted

that one in three black males born in 2001 will go to prison in their lifetime. Clearly incarceration impacts the African American community more than any other in America, thus a greater emphasis on reentry is needed since more than 95% of the incarcerated return home.¹³

THE SOLUTIONS:

Community Corrections programs have proven to be effective when nonviolent offenders, particularly nonviolent drug offenders are allowed to serve their sentences in alternatives to incarceration placements. Individuals participating in these Community Corrections initiatives are in drug surveillance programs. They are also required to address their academic, vocational, and substance abuse issues if appropriate.¹⁴

Reentry programming should be initiated at the time the offender is incarcerated and continue until release, with frequent updates. Comprehensive assessments should be conducted with an intervention plan initiated to address the offenders' deficits and emphasize his/her strengths. Educational programs should be required for all individuals who do not have a high school diploma/GED. Job training programs should be made available to all offenders in order to prepare them for the work force upon release.

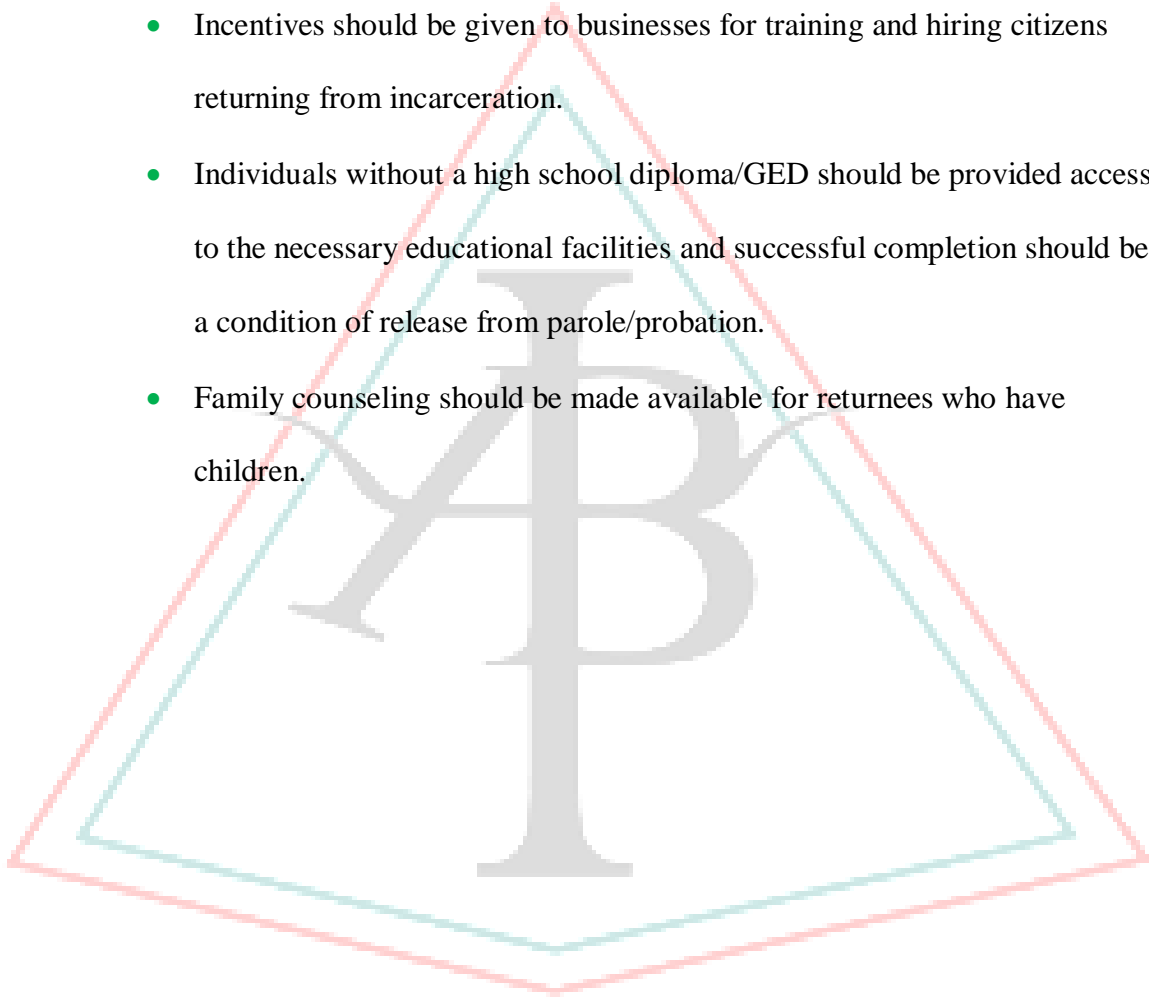
Reentry programs have proven to be a necessary component of successful reentry. They can address many barriers the offender is likely to face/encounter upon release.

A successful reentry program in Washington, DC requires individuals with substance abuse histories to spend 28 days at a residential facility upon release from institutions. They are provided comprehensive assessments including medical and mental allowing the opportunity for, medical and mental health issues to be addressed; insurance registration is processed, reintegration programming is conducted, and referrals are made

to drug treatment programs, and transitional housing if needed. This program should be a model for the country.

Some necessary initiatives for successful reentry are but not limited to should include:

- Faith based initiatives should be established to provide prosocial models to serve as mentors to returning citizens from incarceration.
- Incentives should be given to businesses for training and hiring citizens returning from incarceration.
- Individuals without a high school diploma/GED should be provided access to the necessary educational facilities and successful completion should be a condition of release from parole/probation.
- Family counseling should be made available for returnees who have children.



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