



The Power of Family

The Struggle To Keep Connected with Relatives in Prison

BY ALICE OLLSTEIN

A new report from the Urban Institute proves that good family relationships are critical to the reentry success of ex-offenders returning from prison—but many barriers prevent families from communicating with their incarcerated loved ones. Prison visiting hours are restricted, and often fall during work and school hours. Collect calls from prisons can cost two to three times the normal rate. And because the District of Columbia is not a state, it has no state prisons. Even code felons have to be sent to a federal prison, which can be as close as West Virginia or as far as Texas. With the price of gas climbing and wages stagnant, visiting becomes too costly for most low-income families.

To address these problems, advocates from government and non-profit agencies are pushing for reforms that will make it easier for offenders to connect with their families during their time in prison and after their release.

The Divide

Rhozier “Roach” Brown was serving a life sentence for murder when he found an outlet in theater. After directing over a thousand performances of his original work “Inner Voices,” Roach was granted parole in 1976. He has since advocated for the rights of ex-offenders—in voting, housing, and employment.

Brown served his sentence at

the Lorton Reformatory in Fairfax County, a short and economical bus ride from DC. Lorton closed entirely in 2001, and the thousands of DC residents incarcerated there were handed over to federal prisons across 31 states. Now, says Brown, it’s “almost impossible” for prisoners to remain connected to family.

“Close family communication plays a crucial role in the rehabilitation of an inmate,” he said. “But especially for folks east of the river who are struggling to survive, visiting and even talking on the phone is difficult. If a family is dealing with unemployment and has no income coming in, they can’t afford the gas to drive to Leavenworth, Kansas, or even accept collect calls from their loved ones in prison. Some people don’t see their own mother for 5, 10, 20 years. That has a detrimental, devastating effect.”

Tony Lewis, a Vocational Development Specialist with D.C.’s Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency (CSOSA), stressed the importance of family connection despite these obstacles. “Families are a motivator to be compliant with supervision, obtain employment and stay sober. Ex-offenders want to be positive contributors to their families and don’t want their children to follow in their footsteps.”

Parents and Children

Lewis knows intimately what incarceration can do to a family. His fa-

ther went to prison for life when Lewis was just eight years old. “My world was shook to the core,” he said. “To have him suddenly removed when I was entering my true formative years was very difficult. When a person is taken out of your life, and they can’t physically contribute in any way, it’s like they’re deceased.”

Lewis says he has only seen his father three times in 13 years. “It’s almost impossible to maintain a relationship under those circumstances,” he said.

Our Place DC director Ashley McSwain says women offenders, usually the primary caregivers in a family, bear additional hardships. “Prison isolates the mother from the lives of the children,” she said. “They can’t share in any milestones, and can only parent their children vicariously, through someone else. Women need to be motivated to be successful and they lose that motivation when they can’t see their children with regularity. They often give up and shut down.”

Lewis, who helps returning offenders find employment, agrees. “Their children need them and they need their children,” he said. “They have to feel like they’re living for something.”

McSwain says that when men are incarcerated, their partners make sure to bring their children to visit them—but men do not make a similar effort when women are sent to prison. “No one is stepping up to ensure the women connect with their families,” she said. “The men don’t support the women like the women support the men.”

This separation can be as damaging to the family as it is to the incarcerated parent. Lewis remembers his mother battling mental illness from financial and emotional stress after his father’s incarceration. Children of incarcerated parents are more prone to depression, and to becoming involved with the criminal justice system themselves.

Liz Ryan from the Campaign for Youth Justice says even families who try to connect become discouraged. “There is no network to help families navigate the criminal justice system,” she said. “Once someone goes into the system, the family is not seen as part of the solution. Families get no information or support that would help them deal with the fact that their family member is incarcerated.”

Lewis added that parents returning from prison find it nearly impos-

sible to reconnect with their children. “I hear from a lot of the guys I work with that they don’t have enough authority or respect with their kids to be a good parent. There’s a lot of resentment. The kids say, ‘You left me. You’ve never seen me learn how to ride a bike, or go on a date, or graduate. The trauma I felt was because you weren’t here.’ Sometimes, the child has to become the parent.”

No One to Turn To

The Urban Institute’s “Untapped Role of Family” report found that 87 percent of returning ex-offenders have at least one close family member they could rely on—a much higher percentage than most experts assumed.

“Everyone has this picture in their minds of the typical person leaving prison having no support network whatsoever,” said Urban Institute’s Justice Policy Center director Nancy La Vigne. “When we presented our research to a group of service providers, they said, ‘Your data must be wrong. These people have burned all the bridges with their families.’”

While service providers are pleased that a large majority of ex-offenders have family they can turn to for housing, food and emotional support, 13 percent have no one. Sometimes their relatives have died, or moved away, and sometimes the prisoner is transferred to so many different facilities that they lose touch with family. The report shows that this 13 percent has a greater likelihood of post-release substance use, unemployment, and recidivism.

“Some people come home to nothing,” said Lewis. “Their support system is gone. They don’t know who they’ll stay with. They don’t know how they’ll get their necessities, let alone be compliant with supervision, and find a job. They go into survival mode, and become desperate.”

The rapid gentrification and development sweeping the District, says Lewis, can make this transition even more disorienting. “They’re coming home to a foreign city,” he said. “It’s not just that their family is gone; their neighborhood is gone too.”

Building Bridges and Bonds

Approximately 2,000 men, women and children come back to the District of Columbia out of federal prison every year. With the federal government cutting, not adding, programs for offend-

ers and ex-offenders, individual organizations have stepped in to meet families' needs.

Our Place DC has a popular program that takes family members once a month to visit prisons in West Virginia and Connecticut where many women from DC are serving time. They and other groups are pushing for faster and cheaper ways of communicating with prisoners, and the Federal Bureau of Prisons is currently looking into video conferencing for DC code felons. McSwain has also begun conversations with DC delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton to have a local penitentiary, so that offenders can stay better connected with their families and communities. Norton has fought for years to establish a facility exclusively for male and female DC code felons close enough for regular family contact.

The Campaign for Youth Justice is lobbying to create a community stakeholder committee that includes family members, to advise the government on programs inside and outside prisons.

Based on his personal experience and his years of working with CSOSA, Lewis says his work helping ex-offenders find employment is about families too. "Ex-offenders have to have gainful employment so their children see model of what it means to be an adult," he explained. "Growing up, I never saw a man go to work, only being involved in criminal activity in some way, like pushing drugs or guns. Seeing your parent get up every morning and put on a uniform and go to work has a very positive effect."

Lewis admits that the family challenges facing ex-offenders are "much bigger than what CSOSA can tackle alone," so the agency seeks out as many partnerships as it can with non-profits, service providers, and the faith community. These groups, in turn, reach out to ex-offenders and their families.

"The families know better than anyone what's happening in the justice system," said Ryan. "Things aren't going to change unless families are given an equal voice." ●

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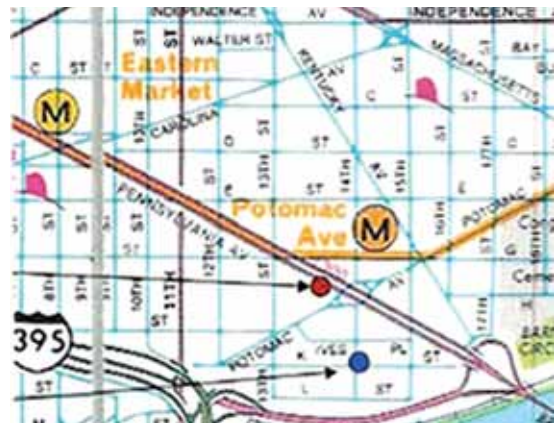
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