

La Nueva Mayoría

By David R. Jones



The Job Crisis

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An Effective Policy to Cut Recidivism

According to the Vera Institute of Justice, the total cost to New York State of its prisons comes close to \$3.6 billion annually. In the midst of the worst economy since the Great Depression, the state is spending over \$60,000 on average per year to house each inmate it incarcerates in state prison.

New York State releases about 25,000 inmates each year. More than 50 percent are back inside within three years, putting New York among the states with the worst recidivism rates in the nation. Many return to prison because they have no real way to earn a legal living on the outside. Some are functionally illiterate; many have little education. All are released with, and will always carry, the stigma of a criminal conviction.

If we have to spend billions on our prisons, let us at least send inmates out with a chance to succeed. Let us provide them with the means to get a decent education.

President Clinton's 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act dismantled higher education in prison by eliminating inmate eligibility for federal Pell Grants. The next year, Governor Pataki completely cut inmates' eligibility for TAP grants that supported college programs in state prisons. With no money to fund them, more than 300 college programs packed up and left almost overnight.

Studies show that education is crucial to not only finding work but avoiding recidivism. For these reasons, inmates should be encouraged to acquire education credits while inside and given the means to do so. In fact, there should be incentives for taking education classes. Those who do should be given a time off their sentences for acquiring a GED or a college degree.

Several New York legislators have introduced bills year after year that would restore TAP Grant eligibility and mandate provision of GED classes to prisoners. But these bills have yet to gather steam. We should look to New Jersey, where two years ago the legislature passed a number of bills aimed at combating recidivism. New Jersey requires its state Department of Corrections to ensure that incarcerated individuals attain a 12th grade education proficiency level. In other words, people getting out of New Jersey state prisons will have a high school diploma or a GED to help them get jobs. The legislation also mandates review of vocational programs in prisons in order to meet the demands of employers on the outside.

These are the sorts of programs that New York State should be emulating. Governor Cuomo has just introduced the Work for Success initiative, which aims to develop a comprehensive, statewide approach to increasing job readiness and improving employment outcomes for people leaving prison.

We support this mission and hope this long-overdue effort works. If it does, it will help strengthen the economy of communities of color in New York City which are home to more than half of released state prisoners. But it can also strengthen the quality of life in other ways. Consider that the principal victims of crimes committed by many of the formerly incarcerated are the very old and the very young in their own communities, and that 87 percent of people who violate parole were unemployed at the time.

The high rates of incarceration are simply not sustainable from a cost standpoint. Yet the legislature continues to balk at providing inmates with the chance for an education, instead warehousing them for the duration of their sentence. This is shortsighted thinking and a wasted opportunity. Providing education for inmates helps keep them from returning to prison. It is not being “soft on crime.” It is a smart – and cost-effective - policy.

David R. Jones is president and CEO of the Community Service Society (CSS), the leading voice on behalf of low-income New Yorkers for over 168 years. For over 10 years he served as a member of the board of directors of the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund. The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer.