

Eric Cadora describes how justice reinvestment in the US is working to repair communities damaged by mass incarceration.

In recent years a new debate over the meaning of community has risen to some prominence in the US from out of an unexpected corner of American society: the criminal justice system. The talk is all about the newly coined question of community re-entry—the onerous road to re-establishing a viable life in free society following imprisonment. Not that the challenges of resettling people who return from prison haven't been with us all along; but the unprecedented social experiment in mass incarceration undertaken by the United States over the last 25 years has succumbed to the inevitable. Who goes in must come out—95 per cent of them anyway. And when you increase the prison population from 200,000 to 2,000,000, questions eventually arise about how to resettle so many people.

Five years ago, few public officials were paying attention to the 630,000 people returning from prison to their communities each year. But today, re-entry is among the top concerns of American justice officials, rating prominent mention in the President's State of the Union Address of 2004. Now, there are re-entry task forces in every statehouse in the country; counties and municipalities are scrambling to chart re-entry schemes; trade associations and think tanks are fine tuning technical assistance strategies; and, hundreds of NGOs in communities across the country now count prisoner resettlement on a par with supportive housing, child and family welfare and jobs as core components of their neighbourhood mission. The re-entry buzz is everywhere.

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Unexpectedly, the terms of the re-entry discussion are very different from those voiced in the traditional American conversation on crime. 'Get tough or be soft'. That polemic has dominated the national debate in the US ever since we surrendered the War on Poverty in the 1970s and declared War on Drugs in the 1980s. The transition was characterized by a distinct change in the attitude of federal policy towards community.

During the War on Poverty, federal policy championed the social and economic welfare of inner-city minority neighbourhoods through major initiatives to house (creation of the Department of Housing and Urban Development), educate (launch of the Head Start program), and employ (creation of the Office of Economic Opportunity and the Job Corps program) the urban poor. When they gave way to the War on Drugs, federal attitudes toward the inner-city neighbourhood changed.

The new attitude was based on the perception that by taking collective responsibility for the social and economic welfare of these communities, we were breeding overdependence and perpetuating detachment from the mainstream. Instead it was thought, we should encourage personal responsibility and individual accountability. The community as such faded from the scene and gave way to the individual. Criminal accountability ('Truth in Sentencing', 'Mandatory Minimums', and 'Three Strikes' laws) and economic self reliance (*The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act*) became the touchstones of the new approach. The shift ushered in a 25-year commitment to addressing the urban poor through martial tactics, which were accommodated by the construction of a vast new criminal justice infrastructure, namely prisons and jails.

Criminal extra-structure v. civil infrastructure

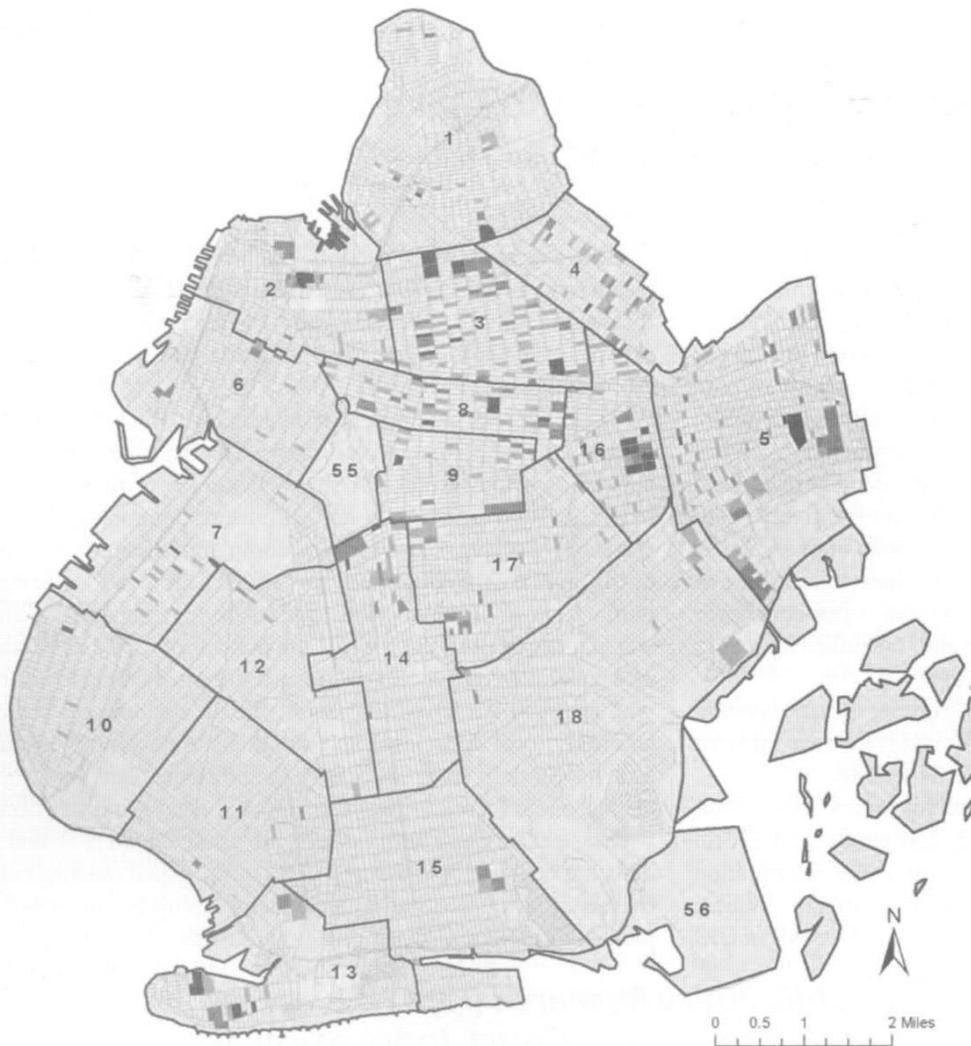
But the re-entry conversation today is based on an entirely different lexicon. It speaks the language of community resettlement, not individual punishment. It asks how well we prepare people for re-entry. If parole and probation are responsible for community corrections, why do they fail to resettle so many people? The change in language and focus was not accidental.

Public officials, reform advocates, and community residents have known for some time that re-entry hits certain neighbourhoods disproportionately harder than others. But new neighbourhood studies and computer mapping have brought this fact home with startling clarity. A few inner-city, minority neighbourhoods in each state from New York City to Los Angeles bear the great brunt of resettlement, where in some neighbourhoods, upwards of 15 per cent of the adult male population are recycled through jail or prison each year. Because they return in such high numbers to places with the least capacity to reintegrate them, these communities experience the effects of constant migration on such a large scale that they suffer from what could be termed an internal refugee crisis.

In those same communities, researchers have identified 'million dollar blocks', city blocks for which the state spends a million dollars a year and sometimes more to 'rent' prison cells that house and feed residents who are temporarily removed from their neighbourhoods (Gonnerman, 2004). Meanwhile, for all the spending on the criminal justice infrastructure outside those communities—what might more rightly be called 'community extra-structure'—conditions across the country in those neighbourhoods are not improving and half of those released are re-incarcerated within three years (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2004). So the cycle begins again, making neighborhood residents into perpetual 'consumers' of correctional services.

Justice reinvestment

Public officials in the US are beginning to recognize the limitations and potential harm of making a martial approach



Prison expenditure by block, Brooklyn New York

The darkest areas indicate prison expenditure for 2003 starting at one million dollars and going as high as over five million dollars per block.

Map courtesy of www.justicemapping.org

across diverse public service sectors.

In Connecticut, lawmakers became fed up with the repeated recycling of residents in and out of their continually growing prison system. Prison officials found themselves managing the largest hospitals, temporary shelters and employment training agencies in the state, because so many of the people cycling through their facilities suffered from mental illness, drug dependencies, homelessness or long term unemployment. By instituting seemingly minor changes to prison release and parole supervision policies, lawmakers were able to redirect \$14 million dollars annually away from the prison system to parole and probation, and to community re-entry programs in New Haven neighbourhoods (see www.csgeast.org/crimreinvest.asp for a summary of Justice Reinvestment initiatives).

The idea is catching on. Now other states, including Kansas, Illinois, Arizona and Kentucky are all exploring justice reinvestment initiatives. But in each of these places, freeing up criminal justice dollars and other resources

the principal public response to problems of inner-city poverty. Even a behemoth criminal extra-structure cannot make up for a weak civil infrastructure to produce public safety.

In response, a unique collaboration of bi-partisan elected representatives, cross-agency government officials and national advocates emerged to address the ‘who, what, where, and how’ of re-entry. The resulting report – perhaps surprising in this age of diminished expectations for governmental reform – calls for far reaching changes not only in criminal justice policy, but also long-term investment in civil infrastructure, such as affordable and supportive housing, education, family outreach and livable-wage jobs (see www.csgeast.org/crimreentry.asp for the full report). The national acclaim for the report led to a tidal wave of similar initiatives: The U.S. Conference of Mayors, the National Association of Counties, and the National Governors’ Association all formed working committees and launched projects to address the re-entry challenge from their jurisdictional perspectives.

These initiatives are recontextualizing the individual within a broader community of networks—family, housing, schooling, health and work. Known collectively as ‘Justice Reinvestment’, new experiments around the country are reorganizing and reorienting scarce state resources around high-resettlement neighbourhoods and pooling them together in new combinations

is proving easier than figuring out how to reinvest them in communities.

Putting the pieces back together

Like elevated incarceration and re-entry rates, high levels of homelessness are an index of the failure of numerous civil institutions. Crises in affordable housing trigger homelessness. Inadequate community mental health treatment, chronic unemployment and substance abuse leave many people on the street. Aggressive arrest policies sweep homeless and street people into the justice system. Criminal histories disqualify many people from affordable housing and bar them from the labour force. Each individual policy connected with every separate social service has ripple effects across the so-called safety net, yet all holes in the net lead back to prison.

Even as they bring these civil sector calamities to light, reformers are now identifying opportunities to integrate services and create collaborations that will knit together otherwise uncoordinated policies and practices.

In Arizona, where a new justice reinvestment initiative was recently launched, the criminal justice system is only one among many players sitting at the table. Government agencies

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questionnaires to identify local concerns and priorities, and by working with local agencies to tackle the roots of crime (see http://www.brooklynnda.org/Redhook/red_hook.htm).

Probation is necessarily, perhaps, a relatively low profile service – many fewer people have contact with it than the police or the courts. Nevertheless, more could and should be done to engage the public in its work (Bottoms 2004). Community Justice Centres offer one way forward. The Redhook Community Justice Center, for instance, runs well-branded diversionary activities for young people, and provides information about probation for people using the Center. Probation professionals take an active role alongside the Center's judge and local police in public discussions, and work to secure media coverage for probation success stories.

Finally, we need to make better use of community reparation – unpaid work done by offenders with other members of the community. Experience both abroad and at home suggests that this can not only boost public confidence in the CJS – and more particularly in community sentences – but help build valuable contacts between offenders, local employers and local agencies.

To argue that the CJS needs to do more to engage with the public it exists to serve is not to diminish the very good and often innovative work already being done. Liverpool's community justice centre and Salford's new community orientated Magistrates' court are exciting and potentially ground breaking developments. The Magistrates Association, the Probation Board, The Youth Justice Board, individual prisons and local authorities have all run successful initiatives to raise the profile of their work and engage lay people in it. But it is far from clear that we have what is needed: commitment and drive from the top of government to turn the courts, prison and probation (or NOMS) into more outward looking, locally visible services, responsive to local concerns.

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charged with child welfare, employment, housing and public health are crafting an integrated, place-based service model to address re-entry. The integrated model is building on studies by family researchers, who are finding inter-generational histories of substance abuse, homelessness and incarceration, and learning that one aspect is rarely present without the others (see www.familyjustice.org for a full description of research findings). But they are also finding that people in high-resettlement communities often show remarkable strength, ingenuity, resilience and endurance. The coping methods residents develop to negotiate so many disjointed agencies and disparate 'systems' are themselves suggestive of how services might be better coordinated.

In one example of how to retool justice workers, a national technical assistance initiative is underway in a number of cities including New York, Chicago and Phoenix, that retrains parole, probation, and public housing workers to engage with entire families rather than with isolated individuals. By learning how residents work various public systems to piece together basic necessities, civil servants become more helpful to their clients, and to their families and neighbourhoods as well.

And one thing these experiments are finding is an immense opportunity to take advantage of overlaps among different populations in an economy of scale investment. As it turns out, resettlement schemes for people returning from prison find common cause with schemes meant to resettle other 'displaced' populations, such as the homeless, the mentally ill, immigrants, and even those displaced by natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina.

These justice reinvestment experiments are still in their infancy. It will no doubt take years to deconstruct the immense criminal extra-structure that was erected during the War on Drugs era, while at the same time rebuilding the mainstream civil infrastructure. But indications are good. The War on Drugs era separated the individual from the community, both symbolically (through the ethos of personal accountability) and physically (through the mass displacement and imprisonment of young, parenting-age, minority men). Today, the re-entry movement in the U.S. is struggling to sew this torn relationship back together. Along the way, it is providing a safe place to experiment with new solutions to the challenge of persistent poverty and the structural legacy of racism.

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