Coming home to New York City – Programs and Services for People Reentering the Community on Release from Jail or Prison

Before considering the support services and programs available for people coming back to New York City after release from jail or prison it is important to remember who they are and why there are so many of them. The growth in incarceration rates in the United States over the past 40 years is historically unprecedented and internationally unique, rising from about 490,000 in 1980 to over 2.3 million in 2014.

The statistics speak for themselves:

**707 people per 100,000** are in prison and jail in the US compared to European democracies whose rates vary from a high of 148 per 100,000 (United Kingdom) to a low of 67 per 100,000 in Sweden.

The US has almost **25%** **of the whole world’s prison population** but only **5%** of the world’s total population.

It has not always been like this. There has been a four-fold increase in the rate of incarceration in the United States over the last twenty years despite decreases in crime rates, which declined by more than 50 percent between 1980 and 2014. The huge growth in the number of people in prison and jail is the result of policy choices that increased the use of imprisonment as a response to crime, in particular the enactment of additional, often lengthy mandatory minimum sentence laws and “Three strikes and you’re out” laws beginning in the mid 1990s. Now, twenty years later, the impact of mass incarceration has become clear, in particular the way that the lengthy sentences have hurt communities of color, which have been disproportionately affected by imprisonment policies. More than five million children have an incarcerated parent. There is a vicious cycle of poverty, incarceration and school failure that is reproduced from one generation to the next and which makes it imperative that the estimated 700,000 people who are released each year (90-95% of incarcerated people are eventually set free) should be successfully reintegrated into society.

What sort of services and supports await someone leaving prison upstate and returning home to New York City, the destination for most of those incarcerated in New York State prisons? As part of the Correctional Education Initiative at LaGuardia Community College—an effort launched by the College’s President Gail Mellow—in January 2016 a working group of 14 faculty and staff began to investigate the reentry landscape. We spent six months meeting with agencies and organizations, holding roundtable discussions with community-based organizations, facilitating five student discussion groups, sponsoring and attending conferences and meetings, all in order to find out more about what formerly incarcerated students at LaGuardia had experienced before they enrolled at the college and what support they needed once they were working towards a degree.

We also wanted to learn about the landscape for justice-involved youth and adults in New York City. We discovered that support and services are provided by a wide variety of agencies and organizations: non-profit community-based organizations, the public library system, religious groups (mosques, churches, synagogues and interfaith), professional associations, colleges and universities and the city and state agencies.

Students at LaGuardia who had been involved in the criminal justice systems had interacted with one or more of the following agencies: the NYC Department of Correction, for students coming from NYC jails; the NYS Department of Corrections and Community Supervision, for those returning from NY State prisons; the US Bureau of Prisons, for those returning from federal prisons; as well as Youth and Community Development (DYCD), Justice, Veterans Administration, Probation and Parole, all of which have direct responsibility for people who are or have been incarcerated. The majority of people who are released from prison, and many released from jail, are required to report to a city or state agency as a condition of their release for a specified length of time; for example they may be required to meet regularly with parole or probation officers, and to comply with substance abuse treatment or anger management training mandates, observe a curfew, and comply with other conditions of release. They may also be expected to follow-up with a community-based reentry organization, which provides referrals to services such as housing, health care, employment and training or which may provide all of those services itself on site.

These CBOs vary in size and scope, many have been in existence for decades (for example, the Osborne Association and the Fortune Society), some focus on specific populations such as women and children (Hour Children, Green Hope and Women’s Prison Association), or those with significant barriers to employment (STRIVE International), or women going on to college (College and Community Fellowship, which is an off-shoot of the College Initiative program). In recent years, a large number of these organizations have developed productive partnerships under the guidance and supervision of the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS). Beginning in 2005, this state agency began allocating funding to any New York State county that developed a comprehensive County Reentry Task Force (CRTF) providing essential wraparound reentry services to persons recently released from NY State prison. Concentrating upon individuals assessed with medium to high recidivist risk scores, these CRTFs can be found in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Bronx in New York City, as well as in Nassau and Suffolk Counties. See: <http://www.criminaljustice.ny.gov/crimnet/ojsa/initiatives/offender_reentry.htm>

A valuable resource available to people in jail and prison, or reentering the community and to reentry organizations themselves is the free directory of resources and services, *Connections:* [A Guide for Formerly Incarcerated Individuals](https://www.nypl.org/sites/default/files/Connections%202016.pdf), published by the New York Public Library annually. This guide is available on the NYPL web site <https://www.nypl.org/sites/default/files/NYPLConnections2015_0.pdf> and in hard copy. The New York City Commission on Human Rights also has developed a bilingual guide, *Turning the Game Around,* for individuals recently released from jail or prison that offers transitional resource referral information and also informs them about employment protections afforded them in the NYC Human Rights Law. See: <http://www.nyc.gov/html/cchr/html/publications/turning-the-game-around.shtm>

People coming back into society after a long time in prison find the transition difficult, sometimes impossible. In discussion groups at LaGuardia, students who have been involved with the criminal justice system described the need to “create a new you,” that is, figuratively to leave behind the person who got into trouble and made wrong decisions and become another person altogether. Churches and other religious organizations are able to help by providing a supportive community with clear expectations and a new self-image, for example, as a Christian or a Muslim. Another means to a new self-image is through education, by enrolling in college and becoming a student, and many of the most successful transitions into society are the result of forging “new selves” by completing a college degree. The success of such efforts is demonstrated by the fact that the recidivism rate for students in one college-focused program, the College Initiative program for people who enroll at CUNY through the John Jay Prisoner Reentry Institute, is just 3%, compared to the national recidivism rate for all former prisoners, which ranges from 33% for women to between 43-60% for men.

A number of local colleges and universities offer educational programs on-site in jails and prisons, some of which are for credit and some are non-credit, for example, CUNY’s John Jay College, Hostos Community College and LaGuardia Community College and private colleges such as Bard College and Marymount Manhattan College. The Bard Prison Initiative (BPI) creates the opportunity for incarcerated men and women to earn a Bard College degree while serving their sentences and currently enrolls nearly 300 women and men pursuing either associate or bachelor degrees in six prisons across New York State per year. Marymount Manhattan College offers college-prep courses in writing and mathematics and degree programs (Associates of Arts degree in Social Sciences and a Bachelor of Arts degree in Sociology) to approximately 175 women per semester incarcerated at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, New York State’s only maximum-security prison for women. The College provides textbooks and school supplies, and the College Learning Center has a networked computer lab, a library, and an area for students to meet with professors and tutors.

The CUNY Next Steps program on Rikers Island began in July 2015 in response to worsening violent behavior at the jail as a productive alternative to idle time. CUNY Next Steps takes place seven days per week, with a $15 stipend for students maintaining attendance. The curriculum combines cognitive behavioral therapy with computer and writing instruction and a reading circle during the week, along with certification classes on the weekend, and is delivered by a partnership of four entities: two CUNY community colleges (Hostos and LaGuardia); STRIVE International, a community-based organization whose mission has been traditionally to help those re-entering society, and the New York Public Library, all working together with Department of Correction uniformed officers and non-uniformed staff, under the auspices of the CUNY Central Office. This powerful mixture of providers and content has served over 300 people to-date and is proving successful in lessening violence among a group of high-risk detainees.

Several local CBOs that receive grant funding also offer training and group cognitive behavioral therapy in facilities such as Rikers Island and there are small arts programs (writing and drama) offered by volunteers at a number of correctional facilities (e.g., Rehabilitation through the Arts at Sing Sing and a writing program at the Rose M. Singer Center for women on Rikers Island).

Although these educational programs are valuable they are a small remnant of those that had existed until June 1995, when on-site education programs in prisons and jails in New York State and City were terminated after many years of successful operation. That year, over 350 programs ceased offering higher education in New York State correctional facilities after Pell grants for inmates were discontinued in 1994. Thereafter education programs could only be offered in prisons and jails through federal and state grant funding and from private philanthropic foundations. At most, 5% of the incarcerated population have been involved in education programs for the last twenty years. However, in a sign of the changing attitude towards correctional education and as “part of the Obama Administration's commitment to create a fairer, more effective criminal justice system, reduce recidivism, and combat the impact of mass incarceration on communities, the [Second Chance Pell Pilot program](https://s3.amazonaws.com/public-inspection.federalregister.gov/2015-18994.pdf) was launched by the US Department of Education to test new models to allow incarcerated Americans to receive [Pell Grants](http://www2.ed.gov/programs/fpg/index.html) and pursue the postsecondary education with the goal of helping them get jobs, support their families, and turn their lives around.”

CUNY’s proposal to offer courses for college credits and industry-recognized certification through a partnership of John Jay, Hostos Community College and LaGuardia Community College has been approved under this program and will start at Otisville prison and Queensboro Correctional Facility in the fall. We are hopeful that this will open the door to more on-site credit and noncredit education and training programs funded through Pell grants in State and City correctional facilities.

High-quality correctional education has been shown to measurably reduce re-incarceration rates. According to a Department of Justice-funded [2013 study from the RAND Corporation](http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR266.html), incarcerated individuals who participated in correctional education were 43 percent less likely to return to prison within three years than prisoners who did not participate in any correctional education programs.[1][[1]](#footnote-1) By reducing recidivism, correctional education can ultimately save taxpayers money and create safer communities. This connection undoubtedly motivated Gov. Cuomo who two years ago proposed a controversial plan to reintroduce education programs in prison by reviving the New York State Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) for inmates. The plan was abandoned amid opposition in the state legislature but will be now funded by the Manhattan District Attorney’s Office as part of the Criminal Justice Investment Initiative (CJII), which was designed to invest funds in impactful projects that will improve public safety, develop broad crime prevention efforts, and promote a fair and efficient justice system. CJII is focusing on investments within seven priority areas including reentry and diversion.

Seven and a half million dollars have been committed from forfeiture funds from bank settlements to fund the College-in-Prison Reentry Initiative, which supports postsecondary, college-level instruction leading to certification or an Associate’s or Bachelor’s Degree in New York State for a period of five years; and the establishment of an Education Coordinator to oversee and manage this work. The CUNY Institute for State and Local Governance (ISLG) is the technical assistance consultant on this initiative and oversees CJII on behalf of the Manhattan District Attorney’s Office. Proposals will be submitted and funds awarded through the Research Foundation of CUNY (Research Foundation).

Another sign of the changing attitude towards people who have been incarcerated is the new ability to tap into Adult Career and Continuing Education Services-Vocational Rehabilitation (NYSED ACCES-VR) funding for anyone who has any kind of disability (including substance abuse). The mission of ACCES-VR is to assist individuals with disabilities to achieve and maintain employment. This funding can be used to pay for tuition-based training courses that lead to industry-recognized certification. As part of the State’s efforts in encouraging providers to unite with the goal of developing “best practices” in offering reentry deliverables, ACCES-VR also organizes regular meetings of the Reentry Consortium. LaGuardia faculty and staff regularly participate in these meetings specifically designed to encourage the dissemination of current news of interest to reentry practitioners, and the development of productive collaborations.

There are many services and resources for those reentering the community, but the working group at LaGuardia was most struck by how access to those supports sometimes seemed haphazard and requires a recently released man or woman to navigate complex systems to obtain education and training. Once connected to a community-based organization, a religious group or a college many of the students we spoke to had overcome difficulties and flourished, but they were, of necessity, those who had succeeded. Our concern is for those who are not succeeding. The increasing awareness of the impact of mass incarceration and the change in attitude towards people who are criminal justice system-involved is commendable and we look forward to more alternatives to prison and jail and to greater connectivity between all the supports and services available to people reentering the community. Recidivism is an expensive proposition; it costs $60,000 to house someone in prison for a year ($100,000 on Rikers Island), which means that money spent on reentry services and connecting people to education and training programs is enormously cost effective. It also leads to a safer, more productive society.

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Venn Diagram of the New York City Prison Reentry Landscape. Note that the circles do not overlap, indicating the need for greater connection between the different agencies and institutions.



### Agencies referenced in this article:

ATI/Reentry Coalition New York City

http://www.ati-ny.org/

[Women's Prison Association](http://www.wpaonline.org/)

www.wpaonline.org

USDE Policy brief

<http://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/other/expenditures-corrections-education/brief.pdf>

STRIVE International

<http://striveinternational.org>

Osborne Association

<http://www.osborneny.org>

Hour Children

<http://hourchildren.org>

Hudson Link

<http://www.hudsonlink.org>

Green Hope

<https://www.greenhope.org>

Fortune Society

[https://www.google.com/?client=safari#q=Fortune+Society](https://www.google.com/?client=safari" \l "q=Fortune+Society)

College and Community

[www.](http://www.collegeandcommunity.org)**[collegeandcommunity](http://www.collegeandcommunity.org)**[.org](http://www.collegeandcommunity.org)

John Jay Prisoner Reentry Institute

<http://johnjayresearch.org/pri/teaching-learning/college-initiative/>

ACCES-VR

http://www.acces.nysed.gov/vr

Bard Prison Initiative

<http://bpi.bard.edu>

The African Methodist Episcopal Church, 277, Stuyvesant Avenue, Brooklyn, NY 11221

http://www.bridgestreetbrooklyn.org

Community Services Society

http://www.cssny.org

1. One area that is not being addressed at present is high school equivalency. Among state prison inmates, available data suggests that two-thirds have not completed high school (BJS 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)