

**INDIANAPOLIS STAR**

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

**MY VIEW: GREGG KEESLING**

### **Ex-offenders face barriers to paychecks**

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I recently spoke with a friend about the high numbers of inner-city men returning from periods of incarceration who cannot or will not obtain work. "Why should I care if an ex-offender has a job?" he asked. I suggested that it is a moral imperative for our nation and referred to President Bush's 2004 State of the Union Speech when he said, "America is a country of second chances."

I also explained it is in our economic interest as the cost of those who do not work is growing to crisis proportions.

Martin Horn, commissioner of corrections and probation for New York City, offers these facts:

- Two-thirds of those paroled who are unable to find work in the first three months will be rearrested within three years; 50 percent will return to jail or prison.
- In New York state, 89 percent of parole violators are unemployed at the time of violation.
- A 10 percent decrease in real wages results in a 20 percent increase in criminal activity.
- The high cost of incarceration is depleting state budgets, making it more difficult to fund other needed programs.

Horn's statements are powerful reasons to care about an offender's employment status, but perhaps an even greater reason to care is that more than 64 percent of all those incarcerated in the United States are parents of minor children.

More than 10 million children have parents who were or will be incarcerated at some point in their lives. The vast majority of ex-offender parents lived with or had regular contact with their children before going to prison. Each year, about 400,000 mothers and fathers leave jail or prison and return home eager to rebuild their families and their lives. In Marion County, 300 ex-offenders return each month from federal and state facilities, and hundreds more are released from the jail.

These parents face multiple barriers to reuniting with their families, reintegrating into their communities and obtaining stable employment and housing. If they are successful, they will become powerful positive role models for their children. If they are not, their children are at a high risk for following in their footsteps.

New research shows that having a job is the No. 1 predictor of an ex-offender's likelihood not to re-offend. Employment provides the means to reintegrate with their children and families; however, finding a job is difficult for those with criminal records.

Increasingly, criminal records create an unbreakable employment barrier, even when the jobs are unrelated to the past criminal activity. Employers are less willing to hire ex-offenders than any other single category of job applicants. One study found that more than 60 percent of all employers would not hire an applicant with a criminal record. Another study found a criminal record reduced available job opportunities by 50 percent for white applicants and over 64 percent for black applicants.

Compounding a former incarcerated parent's obstacles will be the overdue child support that built up during the period of incarceration. Nearly one-third of all inmates have a child support order when they become incarcerated. Indiana, like many other states, does not suspend or reduce support when a parent with a child support order goes to prison.

These dire numbers do not mean that we should allow ex-offenders to skirt their responsibilities. An important part of reintegration is accepting responsibility and making amends for past mistakes. But public policy can design programs that reward work and responsible behavior and help the individual to take constructive steps forward.

As I said to my friend, the cost of not taking proactive steps now could mean that future generations will repeat the mistakes. In Indiana our communities can no longer afford to stay the course.

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