



For a prisoner nearing release from custody, one set of problems will soon replace another. From being watched and scheduled every minute of every day, the newly released prisoner enters a fast world of choices and more locked doors. From monotonous prison routine, the released prisoner looks at re-entering 'society' as might an alien traveler who is completely unfamiliar with life on Earth.

From just 'doing time' to planning one's time is often an enormous hurdle for the returning or re-entering prisoner. From the institutional world of daily dependence on authority, the re-entry becomes a harrowing series of unfamiliar choices. Where distrust is daily prison fare, the prisoner may now live in a community where few, if any, citizens will greet him, help him make decisions and commit to finding a place for this individual as a neighbor, co-worker or friend.

In today's prison populations, these individuals are people of color mostly, young, uneducated, convicted of nonviolent crimes. About 98% of these people will return to the community — 630,000 annually — and two-thirds will end up back in prison. Most return to prison for violations of parole conditions, not new crime.

A critical part of new thinking about parole in the future is stopping the wasteful pattern of cyclical imprisonment.

Before their release-date, most prisoners will have given little thought to what awaits them outside the prison's front gate, a widespread result of discredited determinate (mandatory or guideline) sentencing policies that don't require, or care about, long-range future planning for release at all. Maybe someone will be there to pick them up, but for many releasees no one will be at the gate to calm their fears about the dismal prospects ahead of them.

Restore Access:

- Food
- Housing
- Education
- Jobs
- Children
- Treatment
- Voting

If it isn't already offered, it won't be easy to find affordable housing, jobs, public assistance and other services. Individuals with drug convictions and a history of drug use will learn they have limited access to social services.

The impact of continued punishment on the outside adds to the despair and confusion of an individual just released from prison. Laws that partially or permanently discourage good citizenship from ex-felons cannot be supported by evidence or sound policy. It compromises

public safety — and adds more costs to taxpayers, too.

Your friends, or religious or civic group you might belong to, may want to consider forming a committee to study your state laws, and suggest changes. Remember to write federal legislators, too — they should be leading in drug, reentry, and sentencing reform.

It makes no sense to continue depriving those who have been deprived, and it makes no sense to continue punishing men and women who successfully served their prison sentence.

Working to end drug war injustice, the November Coalition, a non-profit grassroots organization, was founded in 1997.

Members educate the public about destructive, unnecessary incarceration due to the U.S. drug war. We rely on support from people like you — please join and donate today.

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Working to end drug war injustice

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The November Coalition