

“Prisoner Reentry: National and Local Perspectives on a New Dialogue”

Keynote Address by

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Governor Erlich; Secretary Saar; distinguished guests and friends:

I thank you for the invitation to join you for this important Symposium on new approaches to prisoner reentry in Maryland. For two reasons, I feel a special connection to this gathering of practitioners, policymakers, academics and community leaders. First, until a year ago, I was a resident of Maryland. My family and I lived in Montgomery County for ten years and we always considered ourselves fortunate to live in a state that was recognized as a source of government reform and innovation in so many domains. Second, and more relevant to the discussion at hand, I have always identified Maryland as a state that was a national leader in the important new dialogue on the topic of prisoner reentry.

In many ways, that national dialogue was launched in Maryland. About six years ago, when I was director of the National Institute of Justice in the Clinton administration, Attorney General Janet Reno pulled me aside after a meeting in her office to ask me a simple question: "What are we doing about all the people coming out of prison?" I did not have a good answer to her question, so she asked me and my colleague, Laurie Robinson, the Assistant Attorney General for Justice Programs, to get back to her with a full report in two weeks. I spent the next five years of my life trying to answer that question – including four years as a Senior Fellow at the Urban Institute after I left NIJ. But our first step in developing a better answer in 1999 was to convene a group of experts from six jurisdictions around the country. Each jurisdiction was represented by a team consisting of the state corrections commissioner, the police chief representing the community to which most state prisoners returned, and a community organization from that community. The purpose of the meeting was to explore the possibility that these six jurisdictions could serve as laboratories for developing new approaches to the challenge of prisoner reentry.

I vividly recall that first meeting. The team seated to my right was the team from Maryland – representing the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services, the Baltimore Police Department, and the Enterprise Foundation. They had clearly come prepared to meet the challenge posed by the Attorney General – to test new approaches to prisoner reentry that brought together corrections, law enforcement, and community leaders into a new partnership. You know the rest of the story. The Maryland Reentry Partnership was born. Soon after that kickoff meeting, Attorney General Reno visited Baltimore to meet with a wonderfully diverse group of criminal justice officials, community leaders and formerly incarcerated individuals to launch the Partnership. Your work became a national model, highlighted on 60 Minutes, featured in documentary films, and presented at national conferences. When Governor Erlich was elected, he and Commissioner Saar embraced this experimental effort, expanded it and committed his administration to implementing this new approach across the state. Your new program, Project RESTART, reflects many of the lessons learned from those pilot programs.

When I joined the Urban Institute in 2000, and we launched a national research initiative on prisoner reentry, we returned to our friends in Maryland and asked whether they

wanted to be the pilot site for our study. Again, the reception was enthusiastic. With the support of Commissioner Sondervan and Deputy Commissioner Kavanaugh, we tested our survey instruments in the Maryland Transitional Center. We worked with a variety of community organizations to develop our questionnaires for families and neighborhood impact. We received generous support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Abell Foundation, the Open Society Institute, the Russell Sage Foundation and the Governor's office. When we release our first research report – the *Portrait of Prisoner Reentry in Maryland* – we held the briefing in Baltimore, with a room full of practitioners and community leaders.

Over the past five years, I have talked about Maryland – or, more accurately, boasted about my former home state of Maryland – as I have traveled across our country speaking about prisoner reentry. As I hope you know, in my book on the topic – *But They All Come Back: Facing the Challenges of Prisoner Reentry* – I highlight the Maryland Reentry Partnership as a model for collaboration between a coalitions of community organizations, corrections and law enforcement. I have used the research findings from Maryland extensively in my speaking and writing. So, when Tomi Hiers called and asked whether I would speak at this Symposium, I quickly said yes, because I wanted to come back to Maryland to thank you for your leadership and for your inspiration to me and to so many others around the country.

Let's step back from the Maryland situation to place your symposium in national context. We should ask ourselves a simple question: Why, suddenly, is our field paying so much attention to prisoner reentry? Ten years ago, this national dialogue did not exist. Why now? I think there are three answers to that question.

The first answer is that we have simply started paying overdue attention to the large number of people coming out of prison. This year we can expect about 630,000 individuals to leave our state and federal prisons. That translates into 1,700 a day. This is four times as many people leaving our prisons as was true twenty five years ago, when about 150,000 people left prison each year.

Why have we seen this dramatic increase in the reentry cohort each year? We should not be surprised when we look at these numbers. More people are coming out of prison for the simple reason that we are putting more people into prison. I have coined a phrase for this – I call it the “iron law of imprisonment.” With the rare exception of people who die in prison – either of natural causes or by execution – every prisoner returns home. Hence the title of my first article on this topic – and the title of my book – *“But They All Come Back.”*

In short, because our society has decided to significantly increase the use of prison as a response to crime, we are putting more people in – and more are coming back, and we are belatedly paying attention to the consequences of our policy decisions.

Maryland has followed this national trend of expanding prison populations and reentry cohorts, although at a lower level. Between 1990 and 2001, Maryland's prison

population more than tripled – from about 8,000 prisoners to about 24,000 prisoners – and the per capita rate of imprisonment more than doubled – from 183 per capita to 422 per capita. The iron law of imprisonment is at work here as well – in 1980, about 5,400 people were released from your prisons; by 2001 that number had nearly doubled, rising to 9,448 (La Vigne et al. 2003).

So Maryland has paid attention to prisoner reentry for the same reason as the rest of the country – you have many more former prisoners returning home.

The second reason for this new dialogue is that the nation's crime rates are at the lowest level in a generation. Although we are seeing some local fluctuations, the nation's rate of violent crime has been steadily declining for a decade. According to the National Crime Victimization Survey, the rates of violence in America are at the lowest level since that survey was first conducted in 1973. And, although this good news has received less attention, the nation's property crime rates have been on a downward trend for thirty years and now stand at half the level in the early 1970s.

What, you might ask, does the crime rate have to do with prisoner reentry? Everything and nothing, I would say. On the one hand, the good news is that crime rates are not the hot button issue they were just a decade ago. Therefore, in a political sense, the environment is more conducive to a focus on finding ways to meet the challenges posed by large numbers of people coming out of prison. Although we still have substantial room for improvement, we are no longer demonizing our young people as we were in times past, when experts coined the phrase “super predator” and analysts predicted a “coming bloodbath” of youth violence. Public opinion surveys conducted in Philadelphia and New Jersey now document a willingness by the public to invest in programs that address the needs of returning prisoners. This would not have been the case in the late 1980s or early 1990s.

Yet we should be careful to make an important distinction between the issue of crime rates and the levels of incarceration and reentry. Some public commentators argue that we have achieved our low crime rates precisely because we have put so many people in prison. There is, of course, some truth to this assertion. Putting a million more people in prison over the past thirty years (the prison population has risen from about 300,000 to 1.3 million), many of whom were actively engaged in criminal activity, is certain to have some crime reduction impact. But the entire drop in violence cannot be attributed to more people in prison. According to the most respected academic estimates, about a quarter of the drop can be attributed to increased incarceration – the remaining three quarters can be traced to a combination of a strong economy in the 1990s, the waning of the crack epidemic, changing demographics, policing strategies, and shifts in youth behavior (Blumstein and Wallman).

But there is one particular connection between crime rates and reentry that has been developed quite effectively here in Maryland. When I talk about the Maryland Reentry Partnership, one of the aspects I highlight is the unrelenting focus on the process of discharge planning and what I call the “moment of release.” By focusing on the days and

weeks immediately following the release from prison, the Maryland Reentry Partnership was concentrating on the time when the risk of rearrest is highest. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, thirty percent of all rearrests of former prisoners occur within the first six months after they leave prison (Langan and Levin 2002). In designing our reentry programs, we need to remember one simple maxim: We should put our greatest resources where there is the greatest risk. Because the greatest risk of failure – including relapse to drug use and rearrest for criminal behavior – occurs soon after the prison doors close, we need to focus, laser-like, on programs and interventions that will reduce that risk during those first weeks and months. These interventions should include transitional housing, drug treatment, supported employment, family counseling, and intensive support systems, including support from organizations of ex-offenders, faith institutions and other positive community networks.

The third reason we are witnessing a new dialogue about prisoner reentry is that we have come to realize the devastating impact of high rates of incarceration and reentry on a small number of communities in our country. You know this phenomenon first hand. As we documented in the 2003 *Portrait of Prisoner Reentry in Maryland*, 59 percent of prisoners released in this state return to Baltimore City and, within Baltimore City, thirty percent returned to six of that city's 55 communities – Southwest Baltimore, Greater Rosemont, Sandtown-Winchester/Harlem Park, Greenmount East, Clifton-Berea and Southern Park Heights (LaVigne et al. 2003). This pattern is replicated all across the country, where a small group of neighborhoods – typically communities of color -- are bearing the brunt of the heightened cycle of arrest, removal, incarceration and return of large numbers of their residents, mostly men, who are removed from complex family and social networks for a year or two, on average, then returned for a period of criminal justice supervision.

These communities suffer from the lack of attention to the processes of prisoner reentry. Take, for example, the lack of attention to the children of incarcerated parents. In America today, about eight percent of all minor African-American children have a parent in prison. Many of them are living with grandparents, other relatives or in foster care while the parent is in prison. We give little consideration to the ways we might mitigate the harms they experience during this period of their lives. In particular, we do little to facilitate a healthy reunion when the parent returns home.

For me, this focus on the communities hardest hit by incarceration and reentry provides the greatest opportunity for reform. Once again, the pioneering work in Maryland has highlighted the potential for new partnerships. The simple yet powerful “exit orientation,” in which a coalition of community organizations, including police and parole, sit down with prisoners scheduled to return to that community in the next month or two, is one of the most exciting innovations I have witnessed. These orientations begin with the words “Welcome home,” a simple expression of a human connection. The second message of these sessions is also important – namely, a commitment to working together toward the common goal of successful reentry. The third message – we know you committed crimes in the past, but don't harm your community again in the future –

reflects a sober recognition of the risks associated with the larger enterprise of prisoner reentry.

The successes you achieved in Baltimore through the Reentry Partnership provided the basis for the recommendation in my book that we should fundamentally rethink the role of community supervision in the reentry process, and create new “justice intermediaries” at the community level that will help returning prisoners reduce the risks of failure and seize the opportunities for success (Travis 2005). It is my most fervent hope that you will continue to be a pioneer in the process of reengineering reentry – both on the inside of the prison walls, and most importantly on the outside, where dramatic improvements in reentry outcomes are most likely to be found.

In these many ways, Maryland has been a national leader in shaping a new national discourse on prisoner reentry. I commend you for your work, applaud those who have organized this important symposium, and wish you well as you continue to face the many challenges that lie ahead.

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