

OPINION

Breaking Down the Prison Pipeline

Supporting vital services for released inmates

BY S. BOBBIN SINGH

It's a statistic often quoted in criminal justice circles: 95 percent of prisoners will be released at some point. That figure shows we need to be serious about planning for their release.



People returning to the community from Oregon's prisons and jails face numerous barriers to successfully reintegrating. They have to find work, a place to live, and repair relationships with family and friends that may have been fractured by incarceration or their criminal behavior, all the while complying with whatever conditions of release and post-prison supervision may have been put on them by the system.

More than 2,500 people return home to Multnomah County from prison or jail each year. The simple fact is that the number of people that could use some help transitioning from prison far exceeds the available services.

Even though many newly released inmates are genuinely committed to leading a productive life, there may be legal and other issues that went unaddressed while they were away. These may include child custody problems or loss of parental rights, debt, ruined credit histories, or loss of assets such as their home, job or business. There are also laws and policies that restrict the full participation of people with criminal histories in society. In fact,

Oregon has massive network of 1,100 such laws and policies.

These barriers to reentry disproportionately affect people of color because individuals from these communities are disproportionately likely to be caught up in the criminal justice system. Since the release of Multnomah County's Racial and Ethnic Disparities report in March we have hard proof that people of color are negatively affected at a greater rate than whites at every stage of the system, including after prison or jail.

If we are serious about criminal justice reform, we have to get serious about robust reentry services. These services need to start long before anyone actually leaves prison.

In my organization, the Oregon Justice Resource Center, we have

begun work to increase the civil legal services available to those rejoining the community. We noticed that despite the urgent need, civil legal assistance is hard to obtain. Most newly released people can't afford an attorney and Legal Aid-type services are often stretched beyond capacity. For those who are still incarcerated, and are trying to take proactive steps to prepare for their release, civil legal assistance and information tends to be especially difficult to obtain.

Civil legal assistance can help in a number of ways: expunging or correcting criminal records, securing driver's licenses, gaining parenting time or custody of their children, addressing debt and financial burdens, modifying fees and fines, and helping with eviction proceedings. These services can help reduce recidivism and increase the chances of successful reentry. A 2013 evaluation by the Oregon Criminal Justice Commission showed for every one dollar invested in an effective reentry program saves the public safety system 14 dollars.

There are encouraging signs that more attention is being paid to the importance of reentry services and the barriers that returning individuals may face. The U.S. re-

cently celebrated its first National Reentry Week. It was created by the Department of Justice to highlight the challenges of reentry and promote the great work being done to overcome them. Additionally, a federal judge in New York in a groundbreaking decision chose to sentence a defendant to probation instead of prison. Quoting Michelle Alexander's book "The New Jim Crow," Judge Brock cited the harsh, negative collateral consequences of incarceration and the difficulties of reentry as reasons why he decided not to send the individual to prison.

We need to pay attention to what this judge has realized: That barriers to reentry are holding people back and that is detrimental to society.

If we can support people in contributing positively to their community and families, we can reduce crime, cut police and court costs, and avoid the substantial charge for re-incarcerating someone after another crime. If we are sincere about addressing the civil rights issue of our time, then we need to commit ourselves to assisting those returning home with the support and services they need.

S. Bobbin Singh, J.D., is the executive director of the Oregon Justice Resource Center.

Culture of Fear and Bigotry Takes Hold

We must fight this together

BY GRACE DOLAN-SANDRINO

The weekend of June 12 sent me on a rollercoaster of emotions I never thought possible.

The previous Friday, I was an invited participant in the first-ever White House Summit for African American LGBTQ Youth. I felt amazingly supported, empowered, and valued — by my school, by my family and friends, by President Obama, and by my LGBTQ community.

I was inspired. On Saturday, I marched in the Pride Parade in our nation's capital. I sang and danced with neighbors from every race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender identity. We celebrated ourselves, each other, our allies, and our bright futures.

We were so beautiful and full of promise. I was so proud to be an Afro-Latina-Anglo transgender teen.



Then came Sunday.

I woke up to find that a hatred-filled assassin in Orlando had brutally murdered 49 members of our young, innocent, beautiful, and beloved community, and injured over 50 more.

They say the murderer was a U.S.-born Islamic terrorist. But Omar Mateen's hatred for my community echoes the headlines I see about right-wing fundamentalists of other faiths who call for discrimination against people like me — and for the erasure of my rights as a human being.

His hatred echoes the oppression, arrests, and killings of my black and Latino brothers and sisters on the streets, in schools, and in our prisons. It reflects the cruelty of those who want to keep Muslims and Latinos away from our country — by force — and who still want to keep LGBTQ people from marrying each other. They'll even deny us the right

to pee in peace, if that's what it takes to dehumanize and humiliate us.

I'm not trying to be partisan. But it's hard not to notice that President Obama held a summit to tell us how valued we are, while Donald Trump and many conservative lawmakers want to erase us.

Many Republicans invoked fears of international terrorism, but most said nothing about the members of our LGBTQ communities, who were the very targets and victims. They vow more Islamophobia, but make no mention of the ease with which the killers get and use assault weapons.

I'm only 15 years old, but I know what it's like to have deep love and support, and I've witnessed and been the object of deep hatred and ignorance. I feel angry and heartbroken by this massacre.

A culture of fear and bigotry is again taking hold of this country. But my generation demands our equality and our human rights. We want to lead, and to determine our own future. We want you not

just to love us, but to support us and to listen to us.

So if you don't understand who we are and what we need, ask us.

To start, you can fight back against laws aimed at hurting us or erasing us, like those bigoted and ridiculous bathroom bills. Punish politicians who block sensible gun control. Stop supporting lawmakers who want to exploit and exclude immigrants. Stop the people who are expelling and suspending and arresting and incarcerating us.

They're killing us. Help us stop them.

We're stronger than you think. We're Generation Z, and we come of age in 2018. Our future is majority black and brown, and more openly queer than any before us.

We know that many of you are allies. We need you, and you need us. Together we can stop the rollercoaster of fear and terror and start the climb to the mountaintop of love and liberation.

Grace Dolan-Sandrino is a transgender teen activist. Distributed by Otherwords.org.



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