



Hunger and Mass Incarceration

Bread for the World believes that reforming our country's mass incarceration policies and practices is crucial to ending hunger and poverty. Our criminal justice system is broken. The inequalities that the system has operated with have led to hunger and poverty. Bread is committed to doing our part to end hunger and poverty in ways that advance justice.

Facts about Prison, Hunger and Poverty

People in prison are more likely to have struggled with hunger and poverty before entering prison. This puts them at high risk for returning to conditions of hunger and poverty after prison.

- More than 1 in 10 prisoners were homeless in the months before incarceration. For those with mental illness, the rate is closer to 1 in 5¹. Upon leaving prison, those with a history of living in shelters were almost five times more likely to have a post-release shelter stay.²
- People living in poverty who experience trauma or have a mental illness are less likely to get professional treatment. Some in these circumstances turn to illegal drugs as a way to cope. The government's war on drugs increased by large amounts the number of people in prison with long sentences.
- Previously incarcerated people tend to experience higher levels of unemployment and below-average wages due to their criminal histories, poor work history, lower levels of education, and higher prevalence of physical and mental health problems.



Joseph Moller/Bread for the World

Dominic Duren, a returning citizen, with his son Dominic Jr. Duren not only landed a job after his release from prison, but the work he found is helping other returning citizens as the assistant director of a re-entry program at St. Francis de Sales Parish in Cincinnati, Ohio.

People and their families are more likely to live in poverty and be hungry if they have been incarcerated.

- More than two-thirds of people who were incarcerated were legally employed before going to prison. More than half were the primary source of financial support for their children.³
 - Studies show that a prison record cuts wages for workers by 11 percent, cuts annual employment by nine weeks, and reduces yearly earnings by 40 percent.⁴
 - Children of incarcerated parents are more likely to fall into poverty when a parent is incarcerated because his/her absence results in a loss of income. This is especially true when the parents have lower levels of education. The effects

RETURNING CITIZENS

The term *returning citizens* is sometimes used for people who have been released from prison and who have re-entered society.

of losing a large portion of the household's income is major. The long-term effects of this loss can go well beyond economics. Statistically, children with an incarcerated parent experience increased depression, aggressive behavior, and withdrawal.⁵ Children with incarcerated fathers, in particular, are much more likely to be expelled or suspended from school.⁶

- Families are split up by prison and have added financial burdens. Family members often have to travel long distances for visits and incur costly phone bills to stay in contact with incarcerated family members.⁷
- Inmates can earn federal prison wages that range from 23 cents to \$1.15 per hour but must pay fees from the wages.⁸ Thus, they have little opportunity to save money to help support themselves or their families after prison.
- People not only lose income because they're not employed while in prison, but other costs mount as well, such as court and lawyer fees, child support, and restitution. People also lose work skills, and social and professional networks lapse while in prison, making it harder to find a job after leaving prison.

Some government policies and practices make it even harder for returning citizens to successfully re-enter society and reunite with their families.

- Many returning citizens are **denied government benefits and services that prevent poverty**, support economic security, and promote economic mobility. These bans are a recipe for hunger and recidivism.
 - *Federal law permanently bans people with felony drug convictions from ever receiving TANF (welfare benefits).* Some states have limited these bans, but they're still fully in effect in 12 states and partially in effect in 26 states (including the District of Columbia).⁹
 - *Federal law permanently bans people with felony drug convictions from ever receiving SNAP (formerly known as food stamps).* Some states have limited these bans, but they're still in full effect in nine states.¹⁰
 - People with criminal records, especially for drug offenses, can be **barred**

*from receiving student financial aid.*¹¹ Further education is a direct path toward better work and higher earnings and thus economic stability.

- Many returning citizens are **banned from public housing.**¹² This not only increases homelessness, but it also further separates returning citizens from their families.
- Formerly incarcerated people can be **automatically banned from driving or getting professional licenses.** Some examples of professional licenses that returning citizens cannot get (depending upon the state and the offense) are: nail technician, hair stylist, barber, roofer, accountant, chiropractor, and architect.¹³ Yet these are jobs that some inmates can receive specialized training for *while in prison.*
- **The war on drugs** caused an explosion in our prison population. The massive effort to crack down on drug-related crimes has left millions of people, disproportionately people of color, with the harmful collateral consequences of incarceration. Nearly half of all federal prisoners are serving sentences for drugs.¹⁴
- **Mandatory minimum sentences**, particularly for low-level, non-violent drug offences, tie the hands of judges. These minimums often require unnecessarily and inappropriately long prison terms, which do more harm than good for the future of the individual, the family, and the community. More-



Prison often separates family members and removes breadwinners from a household. When families are together, they are more likely to avoid hunger.

over, Hispanic (38.3 percent) and African-American (31.5 percent) defendants are disproportionately convicted of offenses carrying a federal mandatory minimum penalty (compared to 27.4 overall).¹⁵

- **Policing practices are too often biased against people of color, resulting in disproportionate incarceration rates.** African-Americans are 14 percent of regular drug users but make up 37 percent of those arrested for drug offenses.¹⁶
- **Operating prisons is very expensive and uses money that could be spent on poverty-reducing programs.** It costs much more to keep a person in prison than provide drug treatment, for example. In New York, a community-based program for women with substance abuse disorders designed to keep families together cost an average of \$34,000 per year to house a mother and two children, compared to \$129,000 for incarceration and foster care.¹⁷

Creating a Better System

Congress should make meaningful reforms to our criminal justice system. The reforms should be aimed at:

- reducing the number of people incarcerated and eliminating bias that leads to discriminatory incarceration
- treating incarcerated people humanely and in ways that increase the likelihood of successful reentry and reduced recidivism

- better supporting reentry
- reducing the risk of hunger and poverty among people who have been in prison and their families

Below are some reforms that fit into criminal justice legislation currently being considered by Congress.

- Remove barriers to reentry, such as bans on federal benefits like SNAP, TANF, and public housing. Fund programs that help returning citizens get back on their feet and restart their lives outside prison.
- Fully fund and ensure access to effective prison programming and re-entry services so that upon leaving prison, returning citizens have the skills, education, services, and support necessary to successfully reunite with their families, get the health and counseling services they need, pursue a career, become economically secure, and contribute to their communities.
- Enact smart sentencing reform. Use sentencing guidelines and eliminate mandatory minimum sentences that limit judicial discretion and lead to outlandish prison sentences for low-level, non-violent offenses.
- Eliminate policies that perpetuate racial disparities, such as the 18-to-1 ratio between powder and crack cocaine (it takes 18 times as much powder as crack cocaine to receive the same five-, 10-, or 20-year mandatory minimum prison sentence, even though crack and powder cocaine are the same drug in different forms).

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

In Matthew 25, Jesus tells his disciples that when they are compassionate and help people, it is as if they are doing that to Jesus himself. He names specific groups who deserve our compassion—people who are hungry and thirsty, strangers, people lacking clothing, the ill, and people in prison. And Jesus says we should provide for the physical and emotional needs of these people.

Jesus did not put conditions on who should be helped—only that people should be loved because they were created in the image of God. In fact, the Gospels show Jesus crossing boundaries of social class, gender, and circumstance all the time to offer compassion and help to people, from the despised tax collector to the isolated lepers. He wants us as

Christians to love our neighbors in their present station in life, regardless of where they've been, whether it's prison or poverty.

Jesus had a special concern for people who were vulnerable. In our day and age, this includes the family and children of people in prison or returned citizens.

God speaks of our purpose to rebuild, restore, and renew all that is broken (Isaiah 61 and 58:12). We are called to work to end the brokenness of hunger and poverty in our communities, in our country, and in other places. While all involved in the justice system should be given the respect they are due, special attention should be given to the healing and restoration of people who may be broken by crime and the criminal justice system.

- Expand alternative methods to incarceration. Where appropriate, promote individualized rehabilitative approaches, such as substance-abuse treatment, drug court supervision, alternative reconciliation programs, probation, and community correctional programs. For example, drug courts have been found to save between \$3,000 and \$13,000 per client in reduced prison costs, reduced revolving-door arrests and trials, and reduced victimization.
- Investigate the special needs of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women. Implement ways of stemming the rate of women imprisonment, which is growing 50 percent faster than men. Most of the women who have served time in federal prison for a drug felony are mothers of minor children.
- Work more closely with education and health care systems to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline. Provide appropriate health care when and where it is needed to avoid costly incarceration.

Congress should reform our criminal justice system to:

1. **Enable individuals returning from prison to access key benefits and services** (like SNAP, TANF, and public housing) so they can successfully reenter society without facing hunger, poverty, and conditions that promote recidivism.
2. **Fund and provide programming in prison and reentry services** that have been proven to help those in prison successfully find jobs, reunite with their families, and prevent recidivism. Ensure that the programs meet the needs of women as well as men.
3. **Enact smart sentencing reform** so as to reduce the number of people convicted of low-level, non-violent offences from going to prison with unnecessarily long sentences in the first place.
4. **Find effective ways to reduce discrimination and racial bias in law enforcement and the criminal justice system** like those described in the U.S. Justice Department's review of Ferguson, Missouri's police department so that people are not incarcerated unfairly.

Endnotes

¹ Council of State Governments Justice Center, available at <http://csgjusticecenter.org/nrrc/facts-and-trends/>

² *Id.*

³ Bruce Western and Becky Pettit, *Collateral Costs: Incarceration Effect on Economic Mobility* (2010).

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ Rucker Johnson, *Ever-Increasing Levels of Parental Incarceration and the Consequences for Children* (2007).

⁶ Bruce Western and Becky Pettit, *Collateral Costs: Incarceration Effect on Economic Mobility* (2010).

⁷ Jeremy Travis, Elizabeth Cincotta McBride, and Amy Solomon, *Families Left Behind: The Hidden Costs of Incarceration and Reentry* (2005).

⁸ Federal Bureau of Prisons, available at www.bop.gov/inmates/custody_and_care/unicor.jsp.

⁹ Marc Mauer and Virginia McCalmont, *A Lifetime of Punishment: The Impact of the Felony Drug Ban on Welfare Benefits*, available at www.sentencingproject.org/doc/publications/cc_A%20Lifetime%20of%20Punishment.pdf (2013).

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ Legal Action Center, *After Prison: Roadblocks to Reentry*, available at www.lac.org/roadblocks-to-reentry/upload/lacreport/LAC_PrintReport.pdf.

¹² *Id.* and Legal Action Center, *Improving Housing Opportunities for Individuals with Conviction Records*, available at www.lac.org/toolkits/housing/housing.htm.

¹³ Lisa Riordan Seville, *Got a Criminal Record? Please Go Away*, available at www.thecrimereport.org/news/inside-criminal-justice/2011-03-got-a-criminal-record-please-go-away.

¹⁴ Federal Bureau of Prisons, available at www.bop.gov/about/statistics/statistics_inmate_offenses.jsp.

¹⁵ U.S. Sentencing Commission Report to Congress, Chapter 7, available at www.usc.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/news/congressional-testimony-and-reports/mandatory-minimum-penalties/20111031-rtc-pdf/Chapter_07.pdf and *Families Against Mandatory Minimums*, available at <http://famm.org/the-facts-with-sources/>.

¹⁶ The Sentencing Project, available at http://sentencingproject.org/detail/news.cfm?news_id=1658.

¹⁷ *When Women Flourish... We Can End Hunger*, available at <http://hungerreport.org/2015/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/2015-Chapter-4.pdf>.