Facilitating Reentry of Formerly Incarcerated People: A Systemic Approach

David Peter Stroh

Summary

The multiple organizations and people required to solve a chronic, complex problem often do not appreciate the many ways in which their work is connected. To address this issue the Open Society Institute (www.soros.org) convened The After Prison Initiative, a gathering of 100 progressive leaders dedicated to criminal justice reform, in November 2006. The goals of the meeting were to:

1. Strengthen their personal relationships
2. Deepen awareness of the interdependencies among their diverse efforts
3. Gain insight into potential new areas of leverage for enabling formerly incarcerated people to successfully integrate into society

One of the tools used by Seed Systems (www.seedsys.com), the meeting designers and facilitators, to achieve these goals was systems thinking. Systems thinking is an approach used to develop a shared understanding of why chronic, complex problems such as failed reentry exist – as well as where the leverage lies in solving such problems in a lasting and sustainable way.

As a result of using systems tools the participants deepened their appreciation of how their work was connected and identified the need to reduce the fear of poor people of color as a new leverage point.

The Approach

To prepare for the gathering, we conducted extensive research into the dynamics contributing to high rates of imprisonment and recidivism in the U.S. over the past 30 years. Based on this research we drafted systems maps that illustrated the dynamic relationships among many different factors. Our purpose was to answer the question, "Why, despite participants' best efforts, is it so difficult to facilitate reentry of formerly incarcerated people into society – and what might the participants do differently to get the results they want?"

1

The participants– including leading activists, academics, and lawyers – helped refine the systems map of the reentry problem during the retreat. They then reviewed existing programs funded by the Open Society Institute to promote criminal justice reform. As a result of their collective conversations, they identified one additional leverage point they considered critical to addressing the root cause of the problem.

The Core of the Problem

Many participants resonated with the idea that **the problem of mass incarceration, which in turn shapes the process of reentry, is driven by fear**: not just fear of being victimized by violent crime, but also deeper societal fears of poor people of color. Fear for personal safety has in turn led not only to "get tough" policies in terms of harsher sentencing, but also to a broader criminalization of behaviors of all kinds. It can also be argued that these policies have been driven by an intention to hurt people of color, which manifests as societal barriers to equality or structural racism. The combined policies have resulted in the mass incarceration we see over the past 30 years in this country: prison terms designed to emphasize punishment rather than rehabilitation and remove many people from society for longer periods of time (see Figure 1: An Attempt to Reduce Fear).

Figure 1: An Attempt to Reduce Fear
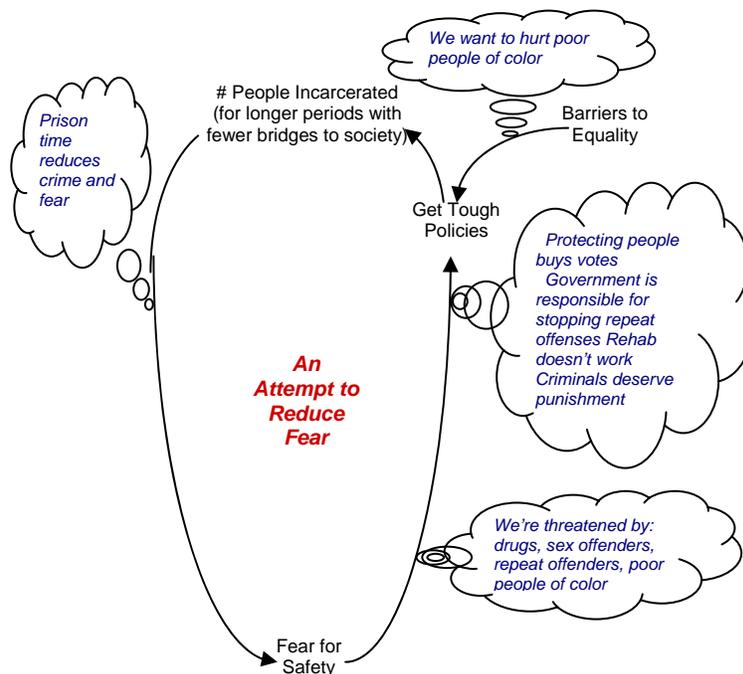
A Fix That Backfires

While mass incarceration might be intended to reduce fear in the U.S., it has led to many **unintended consequences that tend to exacerbate rather than diminish people's fears**.
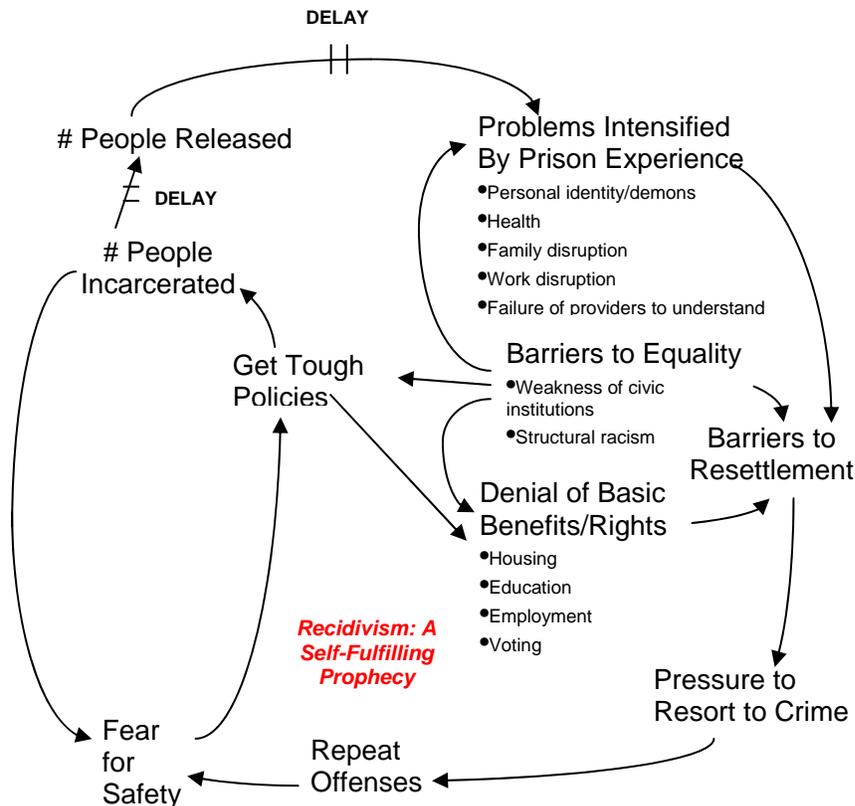
95% of prisoners are released at some point, and they return to society with adjustment problems intensified by their prison experience. These problems exist not only for formerly incarcerated people, but also for the communities to which they return. They include:

- Deep questions of personal identity and self-worth
- Illness
- Family disruption
- Work disruption
- Failure of providers to understand the prison experience

Furthermore, these problems are amplified by the "get tough" policies themselves, which deny housing, education, employment, and even voting rights to ex-convicts. Problems intensified by the prison experience, denials of basic rights and benefits, and societal barriers to equality (in the form of weak civic institutions and structural racism) combine to severely limit the ability of formerly incarcerated people to effectively resettle in their home communities.

These limitations in turn increase the pressure on these people to resort to crime as a way to survive. The pressure tends to lead them to commit repeat offenses, which ironically increases fear in the society even further. The result is a self-fulfilling prophecy where mass incarceration exacerbates the levels of crime and fear it was apparently intended to reduce (see Figure 2: Mass Incarceration Breeds Fear).

Figure 2: Mass Incarceration Breeds Fear

DELAY

People Released

DELAY

People Incarcerated

Problems Intensified By Prison Experience
- Personal identity/demons
- Health
- Family disruption
- Work disruption
- Failure of providers to understand

Get Tough Policies

Barriers to Equality
- Weakness of civic institutions
- Structural racism

Barriers to Resettlement

Denial of Basic Benefits/Rights
- Housing
- Education
- Employment
- Voting

Recidivism: A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

Pressure to Resort to Crime

Fear for Safety

Repeat Offenses

Mass incarceration and the release of so many former prisoners back into society have created additional vicious cycles as well. First, repeat offenses coupled with people's fear for their safety tend to increase political resistance to innovation. Public officials assume that voters blame government for repeat offenses and are thus reluctant to take any risks around new approaches that might in fact facilitate resettlement. The irony is that **political resistance to innovation strengthens the very barriers to resettlement that lead many formerly incarcerated people to commit additional crimes**.

Second, the release of so many people from prison has increased caseloads of parole officers who do not have the time and resources to invest in resettlement. The officers resort instead to simple monitoring activities, which are inherently geared towards registering transgressions. Thus, incentives drive officers away from political risks associated with keeping people who have committed technical violations and lead them instead to issue citations for technical parole violations. The result over time is even more people repeating the cycle of incarceration, parole, revocation and re-incarceration.

Third, mass incarceration has created a prison industry that rewards certain sectors of society: private prison corporations, rural areas or businesses that supply prisons, and correction unions and members. These sectors in turn lobby for more prisons despite the questionable cost-effectiveness of mass incarceration to society overall.

These three vicious cycles – Resistance to Innovation, Focus on Violations, and The Prison Lobby – are summarized in <u>Figure 3: Additional Cycles Produced by Mass Incarceration</u>.

Figure 3: Additional Vicious Cycles Produced by Mass Incarceration

An Addiction to Prison

In addition to actually increasing societal fears over time, **mass incarceration undermines one of the fundamental solutions to reducing these fears permanently.** This is the work of resettlement:

- Strengthening civic institutions and infrastructure in the relatively few communities from which most convicted prisoners come in the first place
- Facilitating cross-agency collaborations to better serve both these individuals and their communities
- Broadly supporting former prisoners to lead productive lives

Mass incarceration undermines society's ability to implement these solutions in several ways. First, the many barriers to resettlement noted earlier make the work of resettlement all that much more difficult. Second, released prisoners who are pressured to commit repeat offenses further undermine public safety in the communities to which they return. Third, the huge investment in prisons reduces funds that could otherwise be used to address the structural causes of much of the fear that has led to mass incarceration. The growing dependence on a quick fix that undermines the ability of a system to respond to a problem in more sustainable ways is, ironically, known as an addiction. In other words, **we have become addicted to prisons as a way of containing some of the dangerously addictive behaviors in society that we fear.**

These dynamics – Undermining Resettlement, Threatening Safety, and Reducing Resettlement Funds – are summarized in <u>Figure 4: An Addiction to Prison</u>.

Figure 4: An Addiction to Prison
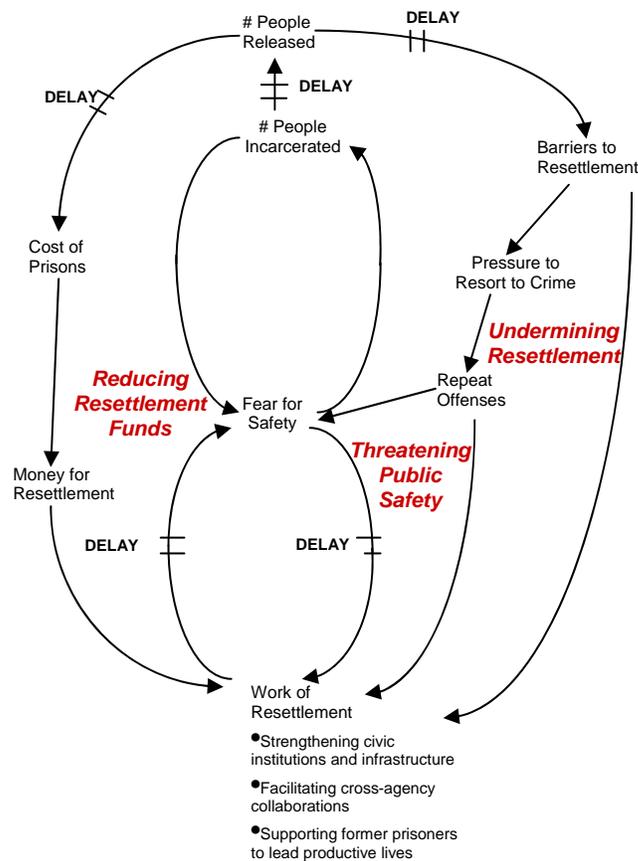
Identifying High Leverage Interventions

The Open Society Institute and its grantees have been working on initiatives in four categories to shift these dynamics:

- Expanding civic participation and re-enfranchisement
- Redirecting the mission and investment for the criminal justice system
- Supporting resettlement
- Creating a new vision of justice for the 21st century

The systems analysis of why the problem persists confirms that these will continue to be important solutions to the problems of mass incarceration and reentry.

One potentially significant missing area uncovered during the retreat was reducing fears in the society overall: not just the fear of being victimized by violent crime, but also deeper fears in the society of poor people of color. Work in this area includes:

1. Clarifying the actual vs. perceived risks to the public of being victimized by violent crime
2. Cost-benefit assessments of investing in prisons vs. addressing the structural causes of crime and fear

3. Increasing understanding of how formerly incarcerated people can *improve* the lives of their communities
4. Allocating public resources to support *community* responsibility for reentry
5. Promotion of other safe innovations for resettlement

These initiatives can shift the debate to one based on:

- Relationship instead of fear
- Collective as well as individual responsibility, and
- Productivity vs. punishment

About the Author:

David Peter Stroh is a Founder and Principal of www.bridgewaypartners.com and an expert in applying Systems Thinking to organizational and societal change. You can contact him at dstroh@bridgewaypartners.com.