

# From Options to Action

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A ROADMAP FOR CITY LEADERS TO  
CONNECT FORMERLY INCARCERATED  
INDIVIDUALS TO WORK

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Laura E. Johnson and  
Renata Cobbs Fletcher  
with Chelsea Farley

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*Public/Private Ventures*

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Public/Private Ventures is a national nonprofit organization that seeks to improve the effectiveness of social policies and programs. P/PV designs, tests and studies initiatives that increase supports, skills and opportunities of residents of low-income communities; works with policymakers to see that the lessons and evidence produced are reflected in policy; and provides training, technical assistance and learning opportunities to practitioners based on documented effective practices.

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### *Mayors and Deputy Mayors:*

Mayor Gregory A. Ballard, Indianapolis, IN  
Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, New York, NY  
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Mayor John DeStefano, Jr., New Haven, CT  
Deputy Mayor of Health and Human Services Linda I. Gibbs, New York, NY  
Mayor W. Wilson Goode, Sr., Philadelphia, PA (1984-1992); Senior Advisor to P/PV  
Mayor Willie W. Herenton, Memphis, TN  
Deputy Mayor of Community and Human Development Salima Siler Marriott, Baltimore, MD  
Mayor Douglas H. Palmer, Trenton, NJ; President of USCM  
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George B. Alexander, Chairman of the New York State Board of Parole  
Conny Doty, Director of the Mayor's Office for Jobs and Community Services, Boston  
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Kimberly Pelletreau, Deputy Director of Youth Opportunity, Boston  
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## Foreword: A Call to Act

by Fred Davie, President, Public/Private Ventures

The prison crisis is greater than ever, but so is our will to solve it.

The US incarcerates a greater percentage of our citizens than any other country—while we have only 5 percent of the world’s population, we have almost a quarter of the world’s prisoners.<sup>1</sup> Being the world’s leader in incarceration is a dubious distinction indeed, and the churning in and out of prisons and jails undermines programs established to lift up low-income communities, makes cities less safe and adds to the taxpayer burden. If we don’t implement solid strategies to help get former prisoners back on their feet, most will end up back behind bars.

Thankfully, some of our nation’s leaders are beginning to take important steps toward addressing reentry issues, and mayors are leading the charge. This leadership was made clear on February 28, 2008, when 150 mayors and city leaders, funders, academics and practitioners from more than 20 cities joined us at a national summit convened to tackle the challenges posed by prison and jail reentry. Because most inmates come from—and return to—urban neighborhoods, it is city lawmakers who witness the devastating toll of mass imprisonment and recidivism most vividly. The experiences and ideas that they shared at the Summit inspired and informed this report.

Many states have also begun to make progress on the issue, and there is momentum at the federal level as well, evidenced by the April 9, 2008, signing of the Second Chance Act. This legislation authorizes a new stream of funding for reentry programs and was finally passed, thanks to years of hard work by a bipartisan group of lawmakers in Washington.

These are promising developments, and we must seize the moment to push for further reforms.

Our goal should be to cut the national recidivism rate in half by 2012 by ensuring that formerly incarcerated people have access to the resources they need to successfully reintegrate into society. Urban policymakers need to make reentry a long-term priority: Cities should learn from one another’s experiences, partner with the right groups, work for change at the state and federal level, and invest in research to ensure reentry programs’ effectiveness.

While America is a proud leader in many things, let’s make sure incarceration is no longer one of them.



*Mayors Summit on Reentry and Employment, February 28, 2008.*

**O**n February 28, 2008, a group of 150 mayors, city leaders, funders, academics and practitioners from more than 20 cities gathered to share effective strategies for connecting formerly incarcerated individuals to work.<sup>2</sup> The same day the Mayors Summit on Reentry and Employment convened in New York, The Pew Charitable Trusts released a sobering new report on incarceration rates that gained media attention across the nation: “For the first time, more than one in every 100 adults is now confined in an American jail or prison.”<sup>3</sup>

This year, some 750,000 men, women and teens will return from state and federal facilities—and many more from city and county jails nationwide—most to already fragile communities, with few social supports, job leads or marketable skills. Not surprisingly, the number who end up back behind bars is staggering, and this cycling in and out of prisons and jails takes a heavy toll on the American public. Taxpayers currently spend over \$60 billion per year on corrections. But the costs are not all financial: High recidivism rates strain already vulnerable urban communities by creating crime and safety issues, damaging families and proliferating an intergenerational cycle of crime.

While the costs of incarceration are spread across local, state and federal governments, cities bear the brunt of the expense for policing struggling communities. People returning from jails and prisons are concentrated in urban neighborhoods—for example, in 2001 almost 60 percent of prisoners released in Maryland returned to Baltimore City,<sup>4</sup> and last year approximately 65 percent of parolees in New York State resided in New York City.<sup>5</sup>

In light of this reality, city leaders have begun to address reentry at the municipal level, developing new collaborative approaches to curbing recidivism. This report was inspired by discussions about these promising strategies that took place at the Mayors Summit, as well as P/PV’s experience in the reentry field and a review of relevant literature. It is meant to provide a framework for reentry efforts and includes guidance for cities in early planning phases as well as those implementing more advanced strategies. The report presents six practical steps for achieving a more coordinated, comprehensive approach to reentry at the city level:

1. **Getting the Lay of the Land.** The planning phase of any citywide reentry initiative involves crucial early steps: reviewing pertinent research; identifying reentry stakeholders; evaluating areas and populations most in need; leveraging mayoral support; and developing a strong messaging platform to build political will and momentum for reentry efforts. These steps will create a solid foundation for the work to come.
2. **Assembling a Task Force.** Cities should develop a reentry task force that includes a broad range of partners—including state and county officials, community- and faith-based organizations, local educational institutions, business associations and employers, and formerly incarcerated individuals and their families—that come together regularly to share data and address challenges and opportunities. To ensure the effectiveness of this task force, it is critical to establish: a stated focus, a clear timeline and set of goals, common measures of success, designated roles and responsibilities, and ongoing communication.
3. **Making Collaboration Work.** Collaboration among city agencies, state and county governments, and community- and faith-based organizations is crucial for successful reentry efforts. City leaders are in a position to convene these partners and collectively devise workable strategies. They can also reinforce the importance of coordinated data collection and analysis among these entities.
4. **Addressing City-Level Barriers to Employment.** Cities should take a comprehensive inventory of legal barriers to employment, such as licensing bans that prevent former prisoners from working in certain industries, and eliminate those that have no relationship to the types of crimes committed. Cities should also lead by example—ensuring that their own hiring practices don't unfairly discriminate against people with criminal records.
5. **Engaging the Business Community.** Cities can play a key role in encouraging employers to hire formerly incarcerated people by educating them about existing federal and state incentives, such as tax credits and bonding insurance; by creating new city-level incentives, such as wage reimbursements; or by partnering with local businesses to create ongoing employment opportunities that benefit all parties.

6. **Taking It to the Next Level.** Although cities play a pivotal role in shaping effective reentry policies, they are bound by state and federal laws. City leaders should work together with state and federal officials to influence policies that affect them. Thoughtful policies concerning access to Pell grants for incarcerated students, payment of child support arrearages accrued during incarceration or access to government benefits and work supports may go a long way in helping people succeed after they are released from prison.

By taking the steps outlined above, cities can make significant progress in creating a more coordinated, intentional approach to reentry that will foster long-term solutions. The benefits of creating and maintaining effective reentry policies cannot be overstated; they include saving taxpayers money, enhancing public safety, attracting investment, strengthening families and improving the lives of children who are adversely impacted when a parent is incarcerated.

With rates of incarceration that greatly exceed those of any other industrialized nation and at any other time in US history,<sup>6</sup> America is certainly far from where we need to be, but there is hope. Public support for reentry initiatives is growing, and the February 28 Summit was a testament to the leading role that mayors and cities are playing in the creation of effective policies. The discussions at the Summit made it clear—the more cities do to make reentry a long-term priority by benefiting from the lessons of other cities and continuing to learn from their own experience, the more effective services will become. Cities must partner with the right groups, actively advocate for needed changes at state and federal levels, and continue efforts to rigorously determine what works and what doesn't.

Because cities are confronted with the day-to-day reality of reentry and see its detrimental effects in their communities, mayors and other municipal leaders have already begun to actively seek out, test and refine lasting solutions. And, if states and the federal government provide much needed support, there is every reason to think that these leaders will be able to make considerable progress toward the kind of long-term change that is needed.



## Endnotes

1. Adam Liptak, "Inmate Count in US Dwarfs Other Nations." *The New York Times*, April 23, 2008.
2. Research has shown that ex-prisoners who find stable employment and develop social bonds have significantly lower recidivism rates. Robert J. Sampson and John H. Laub. October 1990. "Crime and Deviance Over the Life Course: The Salience of Adult Social Bonds." *American Sociological Review*. Robert J. Sampson and John H. Laub. August 1992. "Crime and Deviance in the Life Course." *Annual Review of Sociology*. Christopher Uggen. August 2000. "Work as a Turning Point in the Life Course of Criminals: A Duration Model of Age, Employment, and Recidivism." *American Sociological Review*.
3. *One in 100: Behind Bars in America 2008*. Washington, DC: The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2008, 3. Pew calculated this statistic by dividing an estimate of the total adult population by the total inmate population. For the complete details of the calculation, please see page 27 of the report: <http://www.pewcenter-onthestates.org/uploadedFiles/One%20in%20100.pdf>.
4. Nancy G. La Vigne, et al. *A Portrait of Prisoner Reentry in Maryland*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2003, 38.
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6. The Sentencing Project. "Incarceration." (The Sentencing Project, n.d.) <http://www.sentencingproject.org/IssueAreaHome.aspx?IssueID=2>.

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