

The President Is Right: Ex-Felons Need Aid; [ALL EDITIONS]

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Buried toward the end of his latest State of the Union address, President George W. Bush outlined a surprising new initiative to help ex-inmates reintegrate back into their communities.

The "prisoner re-entry initiative" he proposed is admirable considering that record budget deficits are forcing reductions in most other non-entitlement domestic programs. Though long overdue and extremely modest (\$300 million over four years), the proposed initiative suggests the seriousness of the problem America now faces with its ever-growing ex-offender population.

Thirty years ago, we began to convict and incarcerate a far higher number of individuals than ever before, and we now have the highest incarceration rates in the world. More than 14 million Americans, according to our estimates based on a state-by-state canvass, now have a felony conviction on their records; and, as the president noted in his speech, more than 600,000 inmates will be released from America's prisons and jails this year.

"If they can't find work, or a home, or help, they are much more likely to commit crime and return to prison," the president said. This comment is entirely consistent with the best social science research.

Mounting a successful re-entry program would benefit public safety as well as prisoners and their families. By expanding job training and placement assistance, and providing help with transitional housing and support for counseling services, it would potentially benefit many ex-offenders.

The program deserves bipartisan support.

But at the same time, we must also begin to think about the many other hurdles - employment and other legal restrictions, and prohibitions on a wide range of civil and political rights - that keep ex-offenders from finding their place in society.

As part of the war on crime, Congress and state governments have adopted or extended a large number of legal restrictions on ex-offenders that make their successful reintegration much more difficult. They include restrictions on occupational licensing that prevent work in many types of jobs, on access to public housing and other types of social programs aimed at the poorest Americans and on political rights (such as the right to vote, to serve on juries and to hold public office). Many states also now make a criminal record public information and easily discovered, branding an ex-offender for life.

The limitations may in some cases have good logic behind them (convicted child molesters should not be allowed to work in day-care centers). But many more restrictions seem aimed more at extending punishment than serving any socially useful purpose. For example, in passing the Higher Education Act of 1998, Congress barred ex-felons from being allowed to receive Pell Grants, the largest type of federal student loans. Many states have adopted other restrictions on access to educational benefits. How can we expect ex-offenders to build better lives for themselves if we do not allow them to compete for the same kinds of grants and scholarships as everyone else?

Similarly, many restrictions on what kinds of jobs felons can hold defy logic. In many states, a felony conviction prohibits barbers, social workers and optometrists from practicing their trade. It is hard to

see how such restrictions serve any purpose.

Other restrictions relate to participation in public life. While we expect ex-offenders to abide by the law, most states prevent those on probation or parole from voting, and 13 states prevent some or all ex-offenders from voting for life. Almost all of our ex-offenders are citizens, and the Supreme Court has repeatedly ruled that no one can be stripped of citizenship because of a criminal offense. Yet we deny millions of ex-offenders one of the most basic rights of citizenship, the right to vote.

The spirit of the president's brief remarks on his re-entry initiative during the State of the Union address hint at a fundamental reassessment of how we treat our ex-offenders. His concluding remarks on the subject were stirring: "America is the land of second chance, and when the gates of the prison open, the path ahead should lead to a better life."

But when the path is blocked by laws that make it much more difficult for offenders to find their way to a better life, we prevent them from capitalizing on this second chance.

[Illustration]

Caption: Photos - 1) Jeff Manza, 2) Christopher Uggen