

Becky Hayes Boober and Mark Rubin : [Walking the straight and narrow](#)
Prison often is a revolving door for those who commit crimes anew. More must be done to show offenders how to escape their destructive path.

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Walking the straight and narrow
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Imagine having no home, no job and \$50 in your pocket. For the 95 percent of people currently in prison nationwide who will eventually be released, this is what they have to look forward to. And their reprieve from prison is often short-lived, since more than two-thirds of released prisoners are arrested again within three years.

A 17-year-old Maine inmate recently lamented, "What I did was wrong. I made really stupid mistakes. In spite of it all, I'm not really a bad person. I want to do what is right. But I'm going to need help from lots of people for that to happen."

Reintegrating these offenders into society - also known as "prisoner re-entry" - has become an important policy challenge across the country. Each day in the United States, 1,700 people are released from prisons, or 635,000 this year. In Maine, nearly 1,000 people are released from prison each year, not to mention the hundreds with sentences of less than nine months who are released from county jails, often back into communities with rising housing costs.

Providing former prisoners with a way to earn a legal living and to support their families ultimately is beneficial. It will reduce the number of new crimes that are committed, and give them opportunities to become productive contributors to their communities. A recent commission headed by U.S. Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy urges states to promote successful re-entry of prisoners by establishing community partnerships that provide transitional housing, job placement assistance and substance abuse counseling. In Maine, we should heed this call.

The rate at which former prisoners repeat their offenses clearly suggests more support is needed. Those just out of prison face such problems as getting a job, establishing a checking account, finding a home, and reintegrating within their families. Depending on how long they were imprisoned, knowing how to handle these issues can be difficult. For instance, someone who spent a decade behind bars will have little familiarity with personal computers, ATM transactions or many other modern technologies.

Perhaps even more important are the emotional consequences of long-term incarceration. Many inmates often are shunned by their families and community, creating an emotional trauma that

never heals. Carrying the stigma of an "ex-con" is a complicated psychological and sociological burden that we ought to recognize and reduce as much as possible.

While the reasons for recommitting crimes are complex, some federal policies have made it increasingly difficult for inmates to succeed at developing stable lives once they are released. Take, for instance, drug offenders. Over the past decade, Congress has passed laws allowing states to revoke driving licenses, deny public housing and suspend student loan eligibility to people who have served time for a drug-related offense.

Prisoner re-entry also is affected by prison costs and sentencing guidelines. In 2003, it cost an average of \$33,623 to keep one inmate in the Maine prison system. A commission appointed by Gov. John Baldacci last year recommended changes in Maine's sentencing guidelines that later became law. The new sentencing alternatives attempt to decrease prison and probation populations by enabling judges to allow low-risk, misdemeanor offenders to be incarcerated closer to their communities. As a result, probation workers' caseloads will be reduced to allow them to concentrate on those probationers at highest risk of turning again to crime, including repeat sex offenses. Although the state just opened a new state prison in 2002, Corrections Commissioner Martin Magnusson says that without these sentencing changes, Maine would have had to build yet another state prison "starting now" with a price tag of \$50 million.

Rising incarceration costs, concern about further criminal behavior, and traumatic psychological and emotional impacts on prisoners, their families and the victims' families all suggest the need for creative approaches to this complex problem.

AVENUES TO REFORM

The Augusta-based Maine Reentry Network is one way the state is responding. A federally funded program, the Network holds young offenders accountable for their crimes, while supporting them so they will not commit new ones. Six months prior to release, the Network assesses state prisoners (juvenile and adult prisoners ages 16 to 25) and identifies the factors that put them at the greatest risk of committing a new crime. The prisoner is then provided with support while being required to work on reducing these risk factors.

There are several ways the public can help. People can let their state and local officials know that they support better solutions for transitioning prisoners into the community. They also can support the families involved by inviting them to community activities and events, by becoming a mentor, or by offering jobs or rental housing.

Such transitions can be overwhelming. One Maine man, in his early 30s, said the hardest aspect was trying to re-acquaint himself with his family. "When I'm in here, time stands still for me. But for my wife and son, time moves on. They learn how to get along without me. I want to contribute to the family, but it's hard if I don't have a job. We have to learn all over how to be a family."

People coming back to our communities aren't strangers. They are our sons, our fathers, our daughters, our mothers, sisters, brothers, and our neighbors. In the words of the young inmate, "I

need people who care what I do and let me know that. I guess I'd just ask people to not give up on me."

Also contributing to this story were Kimberly J. Cook, associate professor of criminology at the University of Southern Maine, and Carmen Dorsey, director of the [Maine Statistical Analysis Center](#) at the Muskie School of Public Service.

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