

# Tough on Communities

consequences continue beyond prison walls

Of the 2.2 million people in jails and prisons across the U.S., 95 percent of them will one day return to their communities. Few of those communities will welcome them back with open arms. The barriers to successful re-entry faced by ex-offenders are many: denial of benefits, lack of job training, inadequate drug or mental health treatment, and the scarcity of transitional housing. Drug felons, for example, are permanently barred from receiving public benefits such as welfare, food stamps, Medicaid, Social Security income, federal financial aid, and federal housing assistance. Most employment applications also require ex-offenders to notify potential employers of past convictions, which often keeps them from being considered. Even those who manage to find jobs earn about 30-40% less each year than those without a criminal record. With few options available to help rebuild their lives, many ex-offenders resort to the same actions that put them in prison in the first place. Most felons - 68 percent - find their way back into prison within three years. Nationally, the recidivism rate for all ex-offenders is about 45 percent; yet here in Ohio, that rate has dropped to about 28 percent. Ohio's low recidivism rate can be credited to its renewed emphasis on education and job skills programs within prisons; the growth of reintegration units for prisoners near the end of their terms; and partnerships between local communities and re-entry coalitions.

## Statistics:

- In 2011, about 1,885 people were released from state or federal prison each day.
- Nearly 4.9 million individuals were on probation or parole at the end of 2010.
- Within three years of release, about two-thirds of ex-offenders are arrested for a new crime. Within five years, the number is three-fourths.

## Questions to Consider:

- How does our retributive justice system continue to punish prisoners even after they have "paid for their crimes?"
- How can ex-offenders be expected to become "productive members of society" given the barriers that exist?
- How do these barriers contribute to high recidivism rates for ex-offenders?
- How might educational programs help the 95% of prisoners who will return to their communities?
- How can individuals and communities help create a more restorative justice system?

## Resources:

- "Revolving Door," Editorial (The Blade, 7/3/2013)
- *Downsizing Prisons* by Michael Jacobson
- "Mass Imprisonment and Economic Inequality," Bruce Western (Social Research, Summer 2007)

