



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE OBAMA-BIDEN TRANSITION TEAM

“Not only our future economic soundness but the very soundness of our democratic institutions depends on the determination of our government to give employment to idle men.”

- Franklin Roosevelt, fire side chat, 1938

I. INTRODUCTION

President Roosevelt’s remark remains equally relevant today. There is an undeniable and concrete link between unemployment and higher crime rates. Plus, lower unemployment is much healthier for the economy.

For over 36 years the Safer Foundation has utilized a holistic approach to help people transform their lives and end recidivism. The Safer Foundation continually works toward developing cost-effective, high impact solutions and models of workforce development that meet the unique needs of our clients.

Numerous studies prove that employed people with criminal records are less likely to recidivate. Without meaningful employment there is less income for necessities; instead, there is idle, unproductive time and potentially destructive challenges to economic survival. Simply put, people who return home from prison need an opportunity to work and to become productive community members. Problematically, however, in America we have an invidious dichotomy. We require the formerly incarcerated not only to pay for their crimes and somehow become rehabilitated, but once back in the community we neglect to provide appropriate opportunities and in the employment arena we also openly discriminate.

Currently, 1 in 100 American adults are behind bars. These numbers are unprecedented for the developed world and show no sign of reduction. The incarceration rate itself is problematic, but an arguably bigger problem is what to do for the incarcerated upon their return home. In America, approximately 600,000 inmates are released from prison annually. Unfortunately, too few of those who return to our communities from prison or jail are prepared for their release or receive any supportive services beyond a bus ticket and a few days' spending money. Consequently, according to a study by the U. S. Department of Justice, sixty-seven percent of persons released from state prisons were arrested for new crimes within the first three years after release. While there are many unemployed Americans who lack a criminal record, it is detrimental to pretend that unemployment is any less devastating for someone with a criminal record. Society most benefits from full employment. There is no percentage for the common good in alienating one huge segment of our population. We cannot move forward while artificially restraining the progress of an entire class of citizens, whom having paid their dues, should be on equal footing in all respects.

Research collected by Stephen Raphael, professor at the Goodman School of Public Policy at UC-Berkley, and Rudolf Winter-Ebmer, professor of economics at the University of Linz, Austria, provides a concrete link between unemployment and higher crime rates. It demonstrates not only a significant correlation but a quantitatively large impact on crime.



Based on statistics taken from the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports across the US from 1970-1993, a drop of two percentage points in unemployment could mean a nine percent decline in burglary, 14% in rape and 30% in assault. In other words, based on looking at how crime and unemployment overlapped over a 23 year period, in a given year (1992) had unemployment been one percentage point higher, there would have been 500,000 more crimes in the United States. Consequently, if there were improved prospects for the unemployed, further declines in crime rates would be inevitable.

By bringing together various federal agencies, and partnering with private business and non-profit organizations, we can develop a more successful, multi-pronged approach to the challenges that face America. Below are recommendations that the Safer Foundation believes will be key to growing America's economy, addressing voids within the corrections system and increasing overall public safety. For the purposes of this document Safer's recommendations are concentrated in three specific areas: labor/employment, prison, reentry/public safety.

II. DISCUSSION

A. LABOR/EMPLOYMENT

A stronger labor force and better employment opportunities for people with criminal records is essential to a stronger national economy.

Recommendations

- **Proposed Solutions that Limit Employer Bias Against Formerly Incarcerated Persons**
 - Expand "Ban the Box" by removing the question "Have You Ever Been Convicted of a Misdemeanor or a Felony?" from the federal job application form, instead waiting to assess his/her criminal record later in the process rather than using it as a filter
 - Support Certificates of Relief from Disability/Good Conduct Legislation, provide employers with negligent liability protection
 - Expand Incentives for Employers to Hire People with Criminal Backgrounds
 - Value of incentives to employers who currently hire people with criminal records indicates that non-profit intermediaries should serve the pre-screening and support function that Safer and other organizations provide today. Employers believe that function to be critical to their success
- **Funnel Government Dollars Towards in Prison Job Training**
 - Include in any federal investment in clean energy, or other green initiatives, an effort to train people in prison for green-collar jobs which will put them in a job-training pipeline that creates brighter future opportunities for them
 - Manufacturing plant retooling for clean energy infrastructure
 - Greening affordable housing
- **Facilitate Partnerships with Trade Unions**



- Unions provide decent wage-job opportunities and security and yet people with criminal records are often times isolated from union jobs
- Create opportunities for labor union training in facilities which would create a pipeline into that union upon release from prisons
- Develop a pre-apprenticeship arm that allows movement from transitional jobs to union jobs
- **Reform FBI Rap Sheets**
 - Ensure rap sheets contain complete, accurate and up to date information.
 - Reconsider whether to include “non serious” offenses and arrests which result in no formal charges being filed
 - In the event of adverse action by an employer, job candidate or employee should have access to the rap sheet that was provided to the employer
- **Expand Federal Funding Streams for the Under or Unemployed**
 - Transfer funding that is used for dislocated workers to focus on under or unemployed people
 - Expand the Prisoner Reentry Initiative Grant as well as the Job Training and Economic Development Grant

B. PRISON

Corrections must be involved in preparing incarcerated people for life on the outside through direct and collaborative efforts and with an eye towards ensuring that they have an opportunity to make positive changes in their lives.

Recommendations

- **Robust Funding for the Second Chance Act**
 - Monies that should go to the Second Chance Act includes funding for in prison job training and education that is designed to help develop a sharper and more skilled potential workforce that is better able to meet the demands of an increasingly competitive global economy
- **Leverage Educational/Vocational Programs through Community Colleges**
 - For today’s workforce hard skills are necessary in order to have opportunities to make living wages. Reinstating the Pell Grant in prisons (which ended in 1995) so that inmates are able to take coursework geared towards developing marketable skills, research clearly indicates that inmates who take college courses are significantly less likely to recidivate
- **Robust Funding of Therapeutic Facilities**
 - Require all corrections departments to offer treatment and counseling for people battling alcohol and substance addictions and people with mental health issues
- **Fund Prison/Business Partnerships**
 - Fund more in-prison programs partnering corrections with businesses where businesses employ people incarcerated, enabling them to acquire marketable



skills to increase their potential for success outside of the facilities upon release (The Prison Industry Enhancement Program in Texas is an excellent program that has utilized this model)

- Incent businesses to hire people to work for the company once they are released

C. REENTRY/PUBLIC SAFETY

The issues of employment disparity, reentry and recidivism are intricately interlinked. America still continues to have a “revolving door” within the criminal justice system. Poor communities—mainly families—fund the cost of reentry, and those communities bear the impact and result of limited supports (high unemployment, crime and recidivism rates). A continuum of services from prison to the community is crucial and has a positive impact on public safety not just in terms of short term reentry but also long term successful community integration.

Recommendations

- **Address Needs of People Returning from Prison: Short and Long Term**
 - Experts agree that successful reentry/sustained reintegration must include:
 - Access to stable housing – public housing should be available to those with a criminal record
 - Substance abuse treatment and counseling services
 - Employment with opportunities for career advancement
 - An effective pro-social support system
- **Develop a Reentry Blueprint**
 - Blueprint should center on prisoner reentry which comprehensively addresses the need of both returning prisoners and their families (Safer Foundation/Safer Return Model)
 - Consideration should include not just urban and rural communities but mid-sized and suburban communities as well
- **Family Capacity Building**
 - In conjunction with reentry support for individuals returning to the community, families should be educated about what to expect when the family member returns and how best to prepare for and support return home to ensure a higher probability for success
 - Build the skills necessary to facilitate meaningful planning and boundary setting discussions between the family and the inmate while in the institution in preparation for the individual’s return home
 - Ensure that the family has access to employment and other services
- **Introduce System Reforms**
 - Comprehensive case management
 - Neighborhood based community correction facilities or offices
 - Graduated sanctions/reward programs for technical violations
- **Improve Local Conditions for People within the Community**



- Increase access to pro-social activities
- Increase access to transportation in more rural and suburban communities
- Increase funding for mentorship programs
- Increase local employment opportunities within the neighborhood and communities to which they are returning

III. CONCLUSION

“Work has a greater effect than any other technique of living in the direction of binding the individual closely to reality; in his work, at least, he is securely attached to a part of reality... the human community.”

– Sigmund Freud, Civilization and Its Discontents, 1929

It is a well accepted proposition that work is an essential cornerstone of a successful society. Everyday when we turn on the news we see how the fragile state of our economy is fraying the fabric of our society on a national and global scale. Everyday we wake up and see more businesses folding, more banks floundering, and more jobs lost on a titanic scale. We also feel the impact of high unemployment in ways that extend beyond the purely economical.

Government funded programs that open doors for people with criminal records have the potential to yield considerably tangible benefits to society on multiple levels. Employment is key to public safety, people who work are less likely to be engaged in criminal behavior and are more inclined to feel invested in the community. In fact, they are investing in their community and state and country by becoming productive tax paying members of society that are able to contribute to rebuilding our economy. By focusing on policies that assist people in gaining employment or at least minimize barriers people face when seeking employment, the government will be doing a greater service by empowering members of the community and creating a sense of accountability and responsibility. America can thrive on the highest level through proactive steps taken by our government.