


BY CARRIE CONAWAY PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOSHUA PAUL § Maine is hardly a haven of crime. In fact, it has the lowest incarceration rate in the nation, with only two-thirds as many reported crimes per capita and a violent crime rate 20 percent of the national average. Still, nearly 2,000 Mainers are imprisoned in one of six correctional facilities around the state. While a few are in for life, most are not; almost 700 each



Doing well by

At their best, prisons can help inmates leave more employ

year complete their sentences and return to the community. § Maine's ex-offenders are in growing company. Across the nation, over 1.3 million people are incarcerated in a state or federal prison, and more than 95 percent of them—1,600 every day, 600,000 each year—will eventually be released. In addition, another half-million prisoners are currently detained in county and local jail facilities; almost all of them will

A man with a mustache and goatee, wearing a white t-shirt and a yellow ID badge, stands in a prison workshop. He is holding a wooden frame containing a religious painting of the crucifixion. The painting depicts Jesus on the cross, with a cherub on the right and a sunburst behind the cross. The man has extensive tattoos on his arms and chest. The background shows a large, industrial-looking space with pipes and a blue barrel.

Maine State Prison inmates Ed Hardy (left) and David Bartlett (right) display products made in the prison's industries program, which employs almost 200 prisoners.

doing time?

able than when they arrived. But most aren't there yet.

be released within a year.

Once these inmates return to the outside world, they need to reestablish themselves as productive members of society—get a job, find a place to live, and so on. But many are unprepared to do so. They lack the education, skills, and work experience to land a well-paying job, problems that often contributed to their criminal behavior to begin with and that make the economic temptations of crime that much more difficult to resist. Their time in prison could be used to help prepare inmates for their eventual return to society, and indeed most prisons offer educational and vocational programs geared at making this transition easier. But security concerns and budgetary limitations mean that even in low-crime states like Maine, these programs neither reach every inmate who needs them nor provide enough services to those who do participate. Yet they may be the best hope for helping prisoners make it on the outside.

A prison's highest priority is to guarantee public and inmate safety, not to create a nurturing environment

“A SERIES OF FAILURES”

A look at the prison population is a look at the lives of those at the bottom of the social ladder. To begin with, most inmates have a number of serious obstacles to finding stable employment even before entering prison. Across the nation, less than two-thirds of prisoners have a high school diploma or its equivalent, according to a study by the Bureau of Justice Statistics; even among the high school graduates, many are functionally illiterate. Twelve percent have diagnosed learning disabilities, a rate almost four

times as high as the general population's. Almost two-thirds are black or Hispanic. Only half held a full-time job prior to incarceration. All these factors contribute to exceedingly low earnings; 70 percent earned \$20,000 or less per year before their incarceration.

Inmates also tend to come from troubled homes. Only about 40 percent lived with both parents growing up, and 17 percent lived in a foster home or other institution at some time in their youth. Nearly two in five have at least one family member who has been incarcerated. More than a quarter had parents who abused drugs or alcohol, and almost all have a history of abusing alcohol or illegal drugs themselves. “For most of these guys, their life up until prison has been a series of failures—failure in their family, failure in school, failure in employment, failure in their interpersonal relationships,” says Ellen Mason, who manages prisoner reentry programs for The Work Place in Boston.

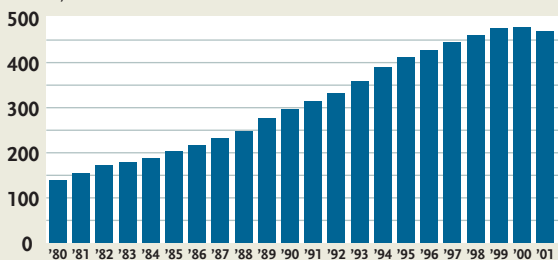
The prison environment typically does little to change this. The highest priorities for prisons are to guarantee the public's safety and to ensure the security of the inmates in the prison, not to create a nurturing psychological and social environment. And for good reason—almost half of state and federal inmates were convicted of violent crimes such as murder, manslaughter, rape, or assault, so the threat of violence is always lurking. Simply keeping these men (93 percent of U.S. inmates are male) secure and preventing them from harming one another requires cadres of trained guards and stringent disciplinary procedures. Multiple daily population counts, restricted access to anything that might be construed as a weapon, and limited physical contact with visitors are all designed to prevent dangerous situations from arising for guards and for the community at large. But they also create an aberrant social environment—one cut off from the positive influences of law-abiding family, friends, and community members, one in which prisoners cannot interact normally with those around them and in which they must constantly be on guard.

Living in such an environment can have negative long-term effects on prisoners, particularly on young adults. Nearly two in five inmates are currently age 29 or younger, and many more entered prison before reaching their 30s—a time in most people's lives when they are gathering the educational and work experiences that will sustain them in future employment. From a purely economic per-

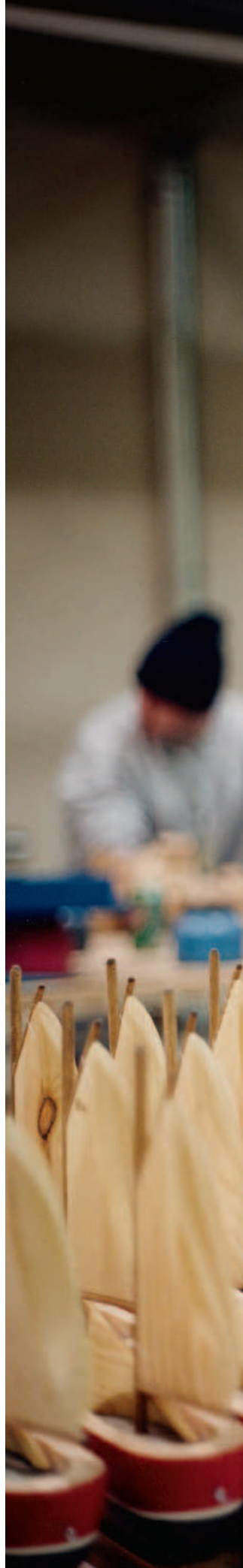
BEHIND BARS

“Get tough on crime” policies, increased sentence lengths, and rising drug convictions have combined to dramatically increase the proportion of the population behind bars. At this rate, more than 5 percent of the U.S. population will eventually serve time in prison.

NUMBER OF SENTENCED INMATES IN STATE AND FEDERAL FACILITIES PER 100,000 PEOPLE IN THE U.S.



SOURCE: Bureau of Justice Statistics



The prison industries program offers a rare opportunity for inmates to earn money. They are paid up to \$2.50 per hour to design and make products, like these toy boats, for later sale in the prison's retail store.





For security reasons, each of the 500 items sold in the showroom generates a trail of paperwork that tracks every piece of wood, screw, and person-hour used in making the product.

spective, the time inmates spend out of the labor market is time in which their skills and training are deteriorating, making it more difficult for them to find employment once they leave the prison setting. But the psychological impact can be equally as harmful. A spell in prison can exacerbate the mental health problems of the 16 percent of the prison population that has been diagnosed with a serious mental illness. And something about the prison environment may actually increase the likelihood that inmates are reincarcerated. One study from California indicated that offenders who had served time in prison were nine percentage points more likely to commit a future crime than were similar offenders placed on probation. Another examining drug offenders in Missouri found that those sentenced to prison were twice as likely to re-offend as those who only received probation. Spending time in prison may thus have the perverse effect of increasing the chance that an ex-convict will commit another crime.

LEARNING AND WORKING

Like most states, Maine makes an effort to mitigate these negative effects by providing meaningful activities for its prisoners. While in prison, Maine's inmates are highly encouraged to participate in some sort of educational or work experience activity. Schooling, from adult basic education and high school equivalency up through college coursework via distance learning, is available. Vocational training programs include welding, electrical, computer repair, and other trades, along with some more unusual offerings like guide-dog training. In many cases, inmates can obtain certification to work in a trade while still in prison. Most prisoners also participate in work assignments such as kitchen duty, cleaning crew, or grounds maintenance. Programs like these are typical in most state prison systems. Vermont, for instance, operates a self-contained high school for prisoners, and Massachusetts prisoners can receive training in trades like construction, culinary arts, or welding.

The most well-known of Maine's work programs, however, are their prison industries. These programs—similar to in-house factories—employ almost 200 inmates in jobs like woodworking, upholstery repair, machine shop, or garment production and offer one of the few opportunities for inmates to earn money while in prison. Prisoners must apply and interview for these jobs and must remain discipline-free to participate. Those select-

While incarcerated, inmates are losing economic ground to peers who are employed or enrolled in school

ed work a six-hour day, five days per week, on tasks such as sewing inmate clothing, repairing furniture, or harvesting wood. Others make boats, cutting boards, furniture, or one of the 500-plus other items for sale in the prison's retail shop in Thomaston. Most are paid between \$1.10 and \$2.50 per hour, depending on skill and experience. Up to 80 percent of their income goes to cover income taxes, room and board, family support, and victim restitution, but they still can make enough to save some money—sometimes as much as \$3,000 to \$5,000—for when they leave prison.

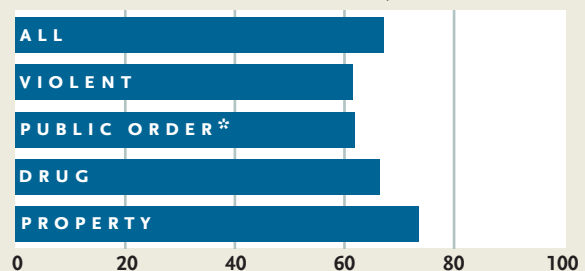
Though the chance to earn some income is definitely an attraction, money is not the only reason why so many prisoners participate. Feeling useful and productive is a critical element of psychological well-being, and one that many of them did not experience before prison. "One prisoner told me, 'If I'd known I could do this before I got here, I wouldn't be here,'" says Kimberly Ellis, director of prison industries programs for Maine's Department of Corrections. Being unemployed can

cause depression and a sense of purposelessness, and ultimately the loss of one's sense of social identity. These problems are only exacerbated in the strange social environment of a prison. This makes programs like prison industries especially important. "For a lot of these guys, this is the most normal part of their day," says Bob Walden, a correctional industries manager at the Maine State Prison in Warren. There, as in the real world, prisoners can learn useful skills, receive some positive feedback on their work, and be rewarded for their effort.

WHAT GOES AROUND, COMES AROUND

Even though more than 95 percent of prisoners are eventually released from prison, over two-thirds of them end up back behind bars within 3 years of their release.

PERCENT OF EX-OFFENDERS REARRESTED WITHIN 3 YEARS, BY ORIGINAL OFFENSE



* Includes weapons, drunk driving, court offenses, commercialized vice, morals and decency charges, liquor law violations, and other public-order offenses.

SOURCE: Bureau of Justice Statistics

EVER SINCE THE FIRST PRISONS, work has been ubiquitous in prison life. Before prisons were established, fines, lashings, or the stocks sufficed for most minor offenses and property crimes. For more serious crimes, offenders were sentenced to public admonitions, expulsion from the community, and very occasionally the death penalty. But in 1557, in an attempt to deal with the problems of

vagrancy and idleness, the city of London decided to abandon the old corporal punishments and instead detain vagrants in workhouses. During their sentences, which could range from weeks to years, inmates were required to engage in hard labor and to receive training in crafts and trades. Officials hoped this would change their “habit of idleness” into a “habit of industry,” and ultimately allow them to earn an honest living.

Detention in workhouses quickly became the standard punishment for vagrants and the idle. Indeed, the planning for the first workhouse in the American colonies began in 1629, only nine years after the Pilgrims first arrived. And by the 1800s, detention had become the penalty of choice even for crimes that did not result from a “habit of idleness.” After all, what worse punishment could there be in

a country that had just attained its liberty than to take a citizen’s liberty away?

Through it all, prisoners worked. Hard labor, such as breaking rocks, digging ditches, or working on chain gangs, was a common feature of prison life in the 1800s, serving both to keep the men occu-

regulated and reform over the next century. By 1887, inmate leasing (in which a prison contracted out the care of its inmates to a farmer or businessperson, a system that led to some of the worst human rights abuses of prisoners) was outlawed by an act of Congress. By 1940,

Congress had also banned the interstate sale of prison-made goods to cut down on unfair competition,

HARD LABOR: *What is the purpose of work in prisons?*

pied and to complete public works projects. Other nineteenth-century incarnations of work programs included mandatory assignments within the institution, vocational education, and contracting directly for outside employers. By the turn of the twentieth century, a full 85 percent of inmates worked, whether directly for the institution or on lease to a local employer.

Working conditions in prisons were far from ideal. Many inmates were injured or died within months of their arrival, and some workers were paid so little as to be akin to slave laborers. Reformers were also concerned that the low pay dragged down wages for unincarcerated low-skilled workers. At the same time, businesses complained that the relatively low cost of prison labor made it difficult to compete in manufacturing the same products with traditional employees. These tensions led to

a restriction that remains in effect today. Prison industries programs could then only make products for sale within the state, limiting them to supplying state government except under special circumstances. Yet despite all these changes, work still played a central role in prison life. Indeed, its role broadened as prisons developed educational and vocational programs such as high school equivalency and trade certification.

Throughout the history of prisons, work has always been acclaimed as the solution for crime. But what has never been clarified is the purpose that work is intended to fulfill. Is it to punish prisoners by having them labor in undesirable jobs? Is it to help maintain order in the prison environment? Is it to rehabilitate inmates and improve their employability on release? Or is it to help prisoners make amends for the costs they have imposed on society by their criminal behavior?

In fact, work serves all of these functions and more, and it is in this ambiguity of purpose that the work solution gains its strength. American society imbues work with broad powers to transform the lives of even those farthest from the fold. Though we may not agree on the causes or consequences of criminal behavior, we can all agree to this: when it comes to reducing crime, work works.

One of the most brutal forms of forced labor for prisoners, chain gangs were common in the U.S. until the early twentieth century, especially in the South.



BETTMANN/CORBIS



The machine shop (below) must scramble to keep outdated machinery, such as a 50-year-old belt sander (above), operational while meeting safety standards.



In the best-case scenario, the training inmates receive in their educational and work programs can help them link up with job opportunities on the outside. “They can walk out of here with a trade, and often at more than entry level,” notes Jeffrey Merrill, the state prison’s warden. Some former inmates from the woodworking program, for instance, have gone on to work in finish carpentry or to open their own woodworking businesses. But even if the prisoners only nail down the basics of how to keep a job, most officials would consider it a success. “A lot of these guys have never held a steady job for any length of time, so this is a good chance for them to practice job skills like showing up on time, doing their work assignment, and keeping a good attitude,” says Ellis.

Running inmate programs can also benefit the prisons themselves. “Idleness is a big security concern in prisons, so we are always trying to find something meaningful for the men to do,” says Merrill. Attending class or going to a prison industries job is a privilege most inmates do not want to jeopardize, so they have a strong incentive to refrain from violence or other infractions that would disqualify them from participating. This in turn makes the guards’ jobs easier. Certain job programs also help to offset administrative costs. Maine’s prison industries programs are not quite self-supporting, but the revenues from sales of finished goods in the retail store (\$1.9 million last year) support most of the costs of running the program, including the salaries of seven staff positions. Another portion of the money prisoners earn returns to the institution in other ways, such as commissary sales and reimbursements for room and board expenses. It is these institutional benefits, as much as the desire to help ex-offenders stay out of prison, that keep the programs running year after year.

TOO LITTLE, TOO LATE

Whether or not the inmates are prepared for it, all but five percent of them will someday rejoin the outside community. Unfortunately, for many of them their freedom won’t last long. The Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that about two-thirds of those released from state and federal facilities are rearrested within three years (see chart). Half are reincarcerated during this time. Given that 600,000 people leave prison every year, that means that 300,000 ex-offenders are imprisoned again within 36 months of their release.

While many people assume that nothing can be done to prevent this outcome, it is far from a *fait accompli*. Recent research shows that prison programming, such as attending school or working in a prison industry, can make a difference in improving ex-offenders’ chances for success. One of the best-designed studies found that prisoners who had partici-

The upholstery shop where Mike Seger sews lawn furniture cushions once accepted repair work from the public. But security concerns led officials to temporarily suspend the program when the prison relocated to a new facility in 2002.





pated in educational or vocational programs in prison were 35 percent less likely to return to prison within one year than a control group who had not participated in those programs. Participants were also 14 percent more likely to be employed.

But most prison systems are not able to provide the programs necessary to attain this level of success with their inmates. One of the biggest challenges most face is simply getting services to everyone who wants or needs them. In Maine, for instance, computer repair is one of the most popular vocational programs, but it is offered only at the correctional facility in Windham, and overcrowding prevents

most prisoners from moving between facilities. The prison industries program has a waiting list of over 100 inmates who would like to participate. And the number of spots in these types of programs has not kept pace with the increasing number of inmates in the system, so a dwindling proportion of prisoners can take advantage of their benefits.

What's more, the training that prisoners receive is not always well matched to the needs of the labor market. Though the prison industries programs employ over 100 people in woodworking and upholstering jobs, the Maine Department of Labor predicts that there will only be about 35 new job

"YOU GO TO JAIL BECAUSE you have issues, just like you go to a hospital because you have issues," says Steven Peevy of the Boston Reentry Initiative. **"If you go into a hospital with a gunshot wound, they're going to try to treat the problem. If they don't treat the problem, you're going to die. But jails walk you right in and right out. By themselves, they don't address the issue that got you there in the first place."**

For the last two years, the Boston Reentry Initiative has been helping jails operate a little more like hospitals.

Each month, law enforcement officials select 15 to 19 inmates from the

Suffolk County House of Corrections whom they feel are most likely to re-offend without major intervention. The inmates begin receiving assistance from community and law enforcement agencies several months before their release, and this help continues seamlessly once they are on the outside. "We try to give these men a huge array of services and support for doing the right thing, and at the same time give them a clear picture of what their next conviction will mean," says Ellen Mason, who runs the employment aspect of the program.

Because the problems that led these men to prison are complex and interrelated, the Boston Reentry Initiative takes a multi-pronged approach to solving them. Close to a dozen law enforcement, employment, housing, educational, faith-based, and other agencies collaborate to help with the critical minutia of building a successful life on the outside: obtaining identification papers, finding housing and employment, and arranging for child support payments.

MENTORS: *Stopping the rebound*

A key element of the program is the mentorship of ex-offenders like Steven Peevy and his colleague Derrick Patrick. Both Peevy and Patrick have served time for armed robbery and now work with the Ella J. Baker House in Dorchester to keep others from going where they've already been. They are extremely involved in their clients' lives before and after they leave prison, calling their families, helping them enroll in school, and providing a sympathetic ear. This constant involvement is the linchpin to the program's success.

Peevy and Patrick are so effective because their clients can relate to them in a way they

never could to someone who hadn't walked a mile in their shoes. "We are proof in ourselves that you don't have to be caught up in this crime confusion," says Patrick. This is especially critical once the ex-offenders are back in the community, when the problems of their prior lives reemerge. "You can't just tell someone what to do and let them out. You have to always be there with them. They need a foundation," says Patrick. "That could be their church and their faith, or not wanting to let their mother down, or doing it for their kids." And, for some, having a mentor to rely on.

Even with all these resources brought to bear on the issue, finding that foundation for each ex-offender is a Herculean task. "The Suffolk County House of Corrections alone releases 200 men a month into the Boston environs," says Mason. "Between the two programs I'm involved in, maybe I get to contact 30 guys. Most of them leave with referrals to agencies, but no prison can afford to give them the real connections they need. What we do is such a drop in the bucket."

opportunities each year in those fields across the entire state of Maine. The Department of Corrections is often hamstrung in their efforts to provide market-relevant training by the costs of modern facilities and the security risks involved in operating in a prison environment. The woodworking program uses equipment as much as 60 years old, jury-rigged together by inmates in the machine shop. The fact that prison officials cannot let a single screw or hinge go unaccounted for, lest an inmate turn it into a weapon or sell it on the prison black market, means that they must operate a cumbersome inventory tracking system unnecessary in a noninstitutional woodworking facility. And even though wages are low, inmates are so closely supervised by guards and production is so inefficient that the total cost of operation is higher than it would be in a regular factory. “We’d like to get more into technology-based programs, like computers, the Internet, or telecommunications,” says Ellis. “But we would have to convince the administration and security people that it’s a safe thing to do. The state just isn’t ready for that yet.”

Linking inmates with social service agencies before their release can help keep them from returning to prison

STOPPING THE REVOLVING DOOR

Even if all ex-offenders left prison fully employable, they would still have to contend with the increasing lack of opportunity for low-skilled workers in today’s economy. In 1970, 89 percent of U.S. men without a high school diploma were in the labor force, but by 2000 this had declined to 75 percent as job opportunities weakened for the less skilled. And even those with jobs may find themselves in a tough economic situation. Many participants in the industries program could be employed as woodworking machine operators, but the pay averages only \$7.74 per hour in Maine. The fastest-growing occupation in the state, cashier, pays \$7.03.

Ex-convicts also must cope with the additional difficulty of getting hired with a criminal record. A recent study showed that two-thirds of employers would not knowingly hire someone with a criminal conviction, and one-third routinely check applicants’ criminal records. Despite this handicap, most former inmates do not experience great difficulty in finding some kind of employment, but they pay the price for their conviction in their wages. Bruce Western, a sociologist at Princeton University, finds that “incarceration reduces the wages of ex-inmates by 10 to 20 percent...[and] the rate of wage growth by about 30 percent,” even after taking into account the increased labor market problems of all low-wage

men during this period.

Nonetheless, officials and policymakers are coming to recognize that if all prisons do is corral inmates, occupy their time, and release them when their debt to society is paid, the cost to society will ultimately be higher than if institutions play an active role in reducing the number of ex-offenders returning to prison. The seeds of this approach are already present in existing educational and work programs. But the need for services is far greater than the current capacity to provide them.

To this end, in July 2002 the federal government pledged \$100 million in grants for states developing prisoner reentry programs. The State of Maine has just received a \$2 million grant to implement a program targeting nearly every 15- to 25-year-old who will eventually leave prison to live in Androscoggin, Knox, Penobscot, or Washington counties. These inmates will be connected early in their

incarceration with an integrated case management team of educators, social workers, mental health specialists, vocational trainers, job developers, and housing providers—specialists

who will continue to work with the inmate after his release. Ex-offenders will also have a trained individual sponsor on the outside who pledges to help them make the transition out of the institution. “Evidence has shown that one of the most significant things you can have in your life is someone who cares about your success or failure. That could be a family member, church member, community member, or employer,” says Wayne Theriault, a planner for the Department of Corrections. The department plans to take what they learn in these four counties and use it in programs across the state, hoping ultimately to reduce the number of ex-offenders who return to prison. (See sidebar on page 29 about a similar program in Boston.)

All the social services, job opportunities, and emotional support in the world cannot prevent every ex-convict from returning to jail. Some offenders prefer the thrill of the criminal life. Some want to quit but cannot conquer their internal demons. Some are under enormous economic pressure and can’t see any other way out. Some simply need to outgrow it. And for prisons, the costs and security concerns of dealing with a sometimes violent and disruptive population place significant limits on the kinds of programs they can offer. Yet despite their limitations, prison programs hold great promise in helping offenders to do well by doing time. *

