

Life on the outside: A departure from get-tough-on-crime

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Melvin Bailey spent five years in prison for selling drugs. After he got out of prison, he did what most ex-offenders do: he returned to his neighborhood and looked for work. But there weren't many jobs on Chicago's West Side, and even fewer open to former prisoners. Eventually he found work, but he didn't forget how difficult his journey had been and how difficult it was for other ex-offenders. He started a program to train and hire ex-prisoners as construction workers, building affordable housing.

That's the kind of program that Representative Danny Davis (D., Ill.) hopes to encourage with the Second Chance Act to help ex-offenders with housing, education and job training. "Too often there is no bridge between prison and life on the outside," notes Davis. The name comes from a phrase in President Bush's 2004 State of the Union address, in which he proclaimed that "America is still the land of the second chance, and when the gates of prison open, the path ahead should lead to a better life."

The bill represents a departure from the get-tough-on-crime focus that has pervaded U.S. politics for decades. Politicians have repeatedly sought stiffer penalties and mandatory prison sentences—policies that always seem to make for good sound bites on the campaign trail. One result is that more than 2 million Americans reside in prisons. That statistic is often cited by way of noting that the U.S. houses more people in prison, in real terms and as a proportion of total population, than any other country in the world.

Less well known is that even in the land of mandatory sentencing and a "let's lock 'em up" attitude, over 650,000 prisoners are released each year. What happens to them? According to some studies, as many as two-thirds are rearrested within three years, and over half are back in prison. That recidivism rate is not surprising given that little is being done to change ex-offenders' conditions and behaviors.

Chris Suellentrop, writing in the *New York Times Magazine* (December 24), suggests that the political climate on criminal justice may be changing. The idea of rehabilitation is no longer a subject of ridicule by conservatives, who realize that mandatory sentencing carries with it the consequences of mandatory release. Suellentrop quotes Senator Sam Brownback (R., Kan.), a supporter of Second Chance: “We should not be resigned to allowing generation after generation to return to prison because they don’t have the tools to break the cycle.”

Though the Second Chance Act is a modest \$100 million effort to foster prerelease programs in prisons and to identify effective reentry programs, the bipartisan support for the bill is striking, says Suellentrop. It represents the first bill in decades that “aims to make the lives of prisoners and ex-prisoners easier, not more difficult.”

The bill hasn’t passed yet, however. It may still get hung up in a dispute over whether any of the \$100 million can go to faith-based programs. If that happens, it would be a victory for the ideologues and a defeat for prisoners, their families and their communities.