

Remarks of Jeremy Travis  
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The Mayors Summit on Reentry and Employment

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Dear Colleagues:

It is truly exhilarating to be here this morning at this Summit on prisoner reentry, convened by the United States Conference of Mayors, organized by Public/Private Ventures (now led by my friend Fred Davie) which is doing such important work on the issues of prisoner reentry and employment around the country, and hosted by another friend and mentor, Ellen Schall, Dean of the Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, who in an earlier chapter of her career won the prestigious Harvard-Ford Foundation Innovations Award for her work on juvenile aftercare.

Every once in a while in life you get the feeling that the stars are aligned to produce some good in the world. This is one of those moments. Gathered here today are representatives of a stunning range of cities across the country, some of the nation's most prominent academics in this arena, and an impressive spectrum of policy advocates who know best how to mobilize resources and ideas to benefit the larger community.

Our challenge this morning is to ensure that we capture this moment – harness this talent – exploit this unique alignment of the stars – to improve the life chances of people who leave the prisons and jails of our country.

To maximize the potential of our Summit, we should begin by realizing the importance of the fact that this Summit is sponsored by the United States Conference of Mayors. An observer could reasonably ask, “Why should mayors care about prisoner reentry? Is this not the function of the state government? Are not prisons – and parole agencies – the responsibility of governors and state legislatures? And in many jurisdictions, where jails and probation departments are entities of county governments, why should a mayor take on these issues that lie in the domain of other elected officials?”

The answer to these questions is simple: Around the country, mayors have decided to get involved in reentry policy because they recognize that the well-being of their cities – and in particular the communities that are struggling with the greatest burdens of disadvantage – is inextricably linked with the operations of our society's systems of incarceration and community supervision.

Stated differently, a mayor who cares about the economic and social well-being of these communities, must also care about the deleterious effects of policies that support a

seemingly endless cycle of arrests, removals, incarceration, return, and rearrest or revocation for large numbers of individuals, mostly men of color. To look the other way is no longer acceptable.

Let's put some numbers to support these assertions.

We tend to forget that over the past generation we have quadrupled the per capita rate of incarceration in this country. Every year since 1972 – in times of war and times of peace; in good economic times, in bad economic times; when crime was going up and crime was going down – we have put more people in prison. We also tend to forget that, with the exception of those few who die in prison, they will all come back.

This year, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, approximately 700,000 individuals will leave our nation's prisons, well over four times the number who made a similar journey thirty years ago. Ninety percent of them are men; a majority are men of color; in every state, they typically go back to a small number of urban neighborhoods, neighborhoods that are struggling with poor schools, weak labor markets, substandard housing, and inadequate health care. As a nation, we have in essence asked these hard-pressed communities to take on the enormous additional responsibility of reintegrating record numbers of their family members who have been sent off to prison and return home, typically with significant service needs, often without supportive social networks.

We must add to this description of prisoner reentry an empirical portrait of another phenomenon, jail reentry, which has not gotten much attention, until recently. The Urban Institute, the Prisoner Reentry Institute of John Jay College, and the Montgomery County Department of Correction and Rehabilitation recently convened a meeting of the Reentry Roundtable to focus on jail reentry. The data collected for this meeting are simply staggering. Each year, jails in this country process an estimated 12 million admissions and releases. This means that 34,000 people are released from jail every day. Stated differently, in less than a month, jails process as many people as prisons do over an entire year.

Yet, despite these numbers, we have paid little attention to jail reentry in this country.

We need to think long and hard about why we have neglected this critical aspect of the reentry issue. I suspect the answer has something to do with our need to hang onto various legal fictions as a way of describing governmental functions. We think there is a difference between parole and probation because one is a state function and one is a county function. But both are systems of criminal justice supervision carried out at a community level. We think there is a difference between reentry after pretrial detention and reentry after a criminal conviction. But both are similar experiences of leaving a state of confinement and returning home. We think there is a difference between reentry from state and federal systems, from adult and juvenile systems, but all reentry is the same, on a fundamental level – someone is reconnecting with family, community, and social networks after being locked up.

So the involvement of mayors is an important political development because mayors are positioned to argue that these legal distinctions make no difference, that successful reentry is a community goal irrespective of the institution of confinement or form of supervision.

Mayors are important for a second reason. They have authority over the services that are essential to successful reentry. We have moved far away from the traditional model of parole that envisions a parole or probation officer as a case worker, seated in a downtown office, providing at best a half hour supervision session a month. The most robust models of supervision are now community based, with the officer playing the role of service broker combined with network manager and sometimes community organizer. In this model, it is important to bring all the right resources to the table --- housing, employment, health care, child welfare, civic organizations and faith institutions. Many of these are under mayoral control.

But the role of the mayor extends far beyond that of service manager. To be effective, the mayor must see the links between incarceration and critical policy goals. An effective mayor will realize the following truths:

- To reduce homelessness in his or her city, it is critical to ensure that people not leave prison or jails and go straight into a homeless shelter.
- To reduce the spread of HIV-AIDS, TB, Hepatitis C, sexually transmitted diseases, and other communicable diseases, it is imperative to ensure that people incarcerated are tested for these diseases, learn health habits to avoid contracting them, and where appropriate continue a program of treatment after release.
- To reduce poverty and improve employment outcomes for those hardest to employ, we must see the connection between imprisonment and unemployment and develop transitional jobs programs to counteract the harmful effects of incarceration on lifetime earnings.
- To reduce drug use, we must recognize that three-quarters of the people in prison or jail have histories of drug addiction, ensure that they receive treatment while in prison or jail, and provide priority access to drug treatment during reentry to reduce the high rate of relapse.
- Finally, an effective mayor interested in reducing crime rates will understand the importance of securing the safe return home of thousands of individuals who come back from prison or jail each month.

I am proud to say that many of these initiatives are now underway in my home town, New York City. I recall inviting Martin Horn, our Corrections Commissioner, and Linda Gibbs, now our Deputy Mayor for Human Services but then the City's Commissioner for Homeless Services, to Washington to participate in a Reentry Roundtable on Housing and Homelessness. They were a striking example of what I am calling for here – a

collaborative effort to achieve important policy goals – in this case, reducing homelessness – by working at the intersection of social policy and prisoner reentry.

Since that meeting, the Department of Corrections here, under Mary Horn's leadership, has launched a number of initiatives to help prepare people leaving jail for success on the outside, by providing birth certificates, Medicaid eligibility, food stamps, social security cards and supportive housing. Most recently, Mayor Bloomberg, as part of an ambitious program to reduce poverty, has announced funding to support the creation of the New York City Justice Corps, a community-based transitional employment program for people leaving prison and jail, building on the justice intermediary model. I am so pleased that this City is providing this national leadership.

Yes, we face enormous challenges as we strive to meet the daunting goals we have set for ourselves at this Summit. Certainly, the involvement of our mayors represents a tremendous asset to us, one that we have not seen before. The involvement of the academic community, the advocacy and service provider community, the networks of formerly incarcerated men and women, and the faith leaders who understand these issues gives me great hope. I think the stars are aligned to do great things. I applaud you for seizing this moment.