Working Around a Criminal History

In a given year, about 12 million Americans are arrested. About 1.2 million of these apprehensions are for violent crimes. There are approximately 2.3 million men and women incarcerated in the U.S. at any time.

Crime produces many social costs. One of these is that even after they have served their time, persons convicted of crimes will often remain unemployed. This increases the chances they will break the law again—hurting additional victims, ending up once again a charge of the state in prison, and being lost to society as a productive worker, taxpayer, contributing parent.
Of the 650,000 ex-offenders who are released from state and federal prisons each year (nine out of ten of them men) two thirds currently get rearrested within three years. Only a minority of prisoners have a solid familial support structure to fall back on after they walk out of prison. Lining up housing, getting loans, even acquiring a driver’s license, can be tricky for an ex-convict. Many employers have understandable reservations about hiring former prisoners. So returning to familiar criminal patterns is an obvious risk.

If more released prisoners can be redirected to work and respectable citizenship, many negative social and economic consequences will be headed off. “The outcome of helping former prisoners become productive is overwhelmingly positive,” says Texas donor Pat O’Brien. “Instead of costing the state money, these men can become successful, contributing members of society.”

Already, many good workforce-development organizations have at least some guidance to offer on overcoming a crime record. That’s because groups serving the hardest to employ know that past crimes are often part of the snarl of obstacles that have to be overcome on the path to self-support. Half to two thirds of the people who walk through the doors at many work nonprofits have some sort of criminal experience.

For instance, 60 percent of the men and women arriving at WorkFaith Connection (the Houston nonprofit inspired by Cincinnati Works) have a crime history. The most common convictions are drug-related; many women have a past in prostitution. The WorkFaith Connection staff encourage applicants to be honest with prospective employers about their record. Lying is never a solution, they counsel, while full disclosure and evidence of a new direction will inspire many employers to offer a second chance.

Similarly, 50 percent to 70 percent of the individuals who flow through Denver’s Belay Enterprises have a criminal record. CEO James Reiner told us that convincing employers to hire a worker who has just completed a criminal sentence can be challenging, but that many companies are willing to look beyond a criminal record if the perpetrator has successfully held at least one job after his punishment. Helping an ex-offender build up that much-needed track record at a first workplace is often the key to a successful transition into the mainstream world.

Homeboy Industries, discussed in Chapter 5, does remarkable things with former gang members. Nearly all of its clients were involved in illegal activity. Many of them carry an official criminal record. Yet the group is able to redirect many into decent work.
Like Homeboy, Belay, and WorkFaith, other programs like Cara, StepUp, Taller San Jose, and America Works also help clients with criminal records as part of their wider efforts to reinforce work. Donors might consider supporting one of these existing programs by earmarking a grant to expand or deepen initiatives specifically serving ex-felons. Or a donor could focus narrowly on reaching former criminals, either by launching a new organization or adding a fresh track at a group already serving a complementary clientele.

Next in this chapter we will explore several donor-funded organizations that work inside and outside of prison walls to transform incarcerated criminals, assist their dependents, and guide former prisoners toward becoming useful workers.

**Prison Entrepreneurship Program**

While they face impediments, former criminals also sometimes have useful capabilities that can be tapped. Researchers have found that some ex-offenders have what it takes to be an entrepreneur: demonstrating independence, creativity, and resilience. Instead of using these qualities to cope with environmental stresses or to create criminal enterprises, as they may have in the past, there is potential for tapping these talents to succeed in small business. One analysis by management and entrepreneurship professor Matthew Sonfield of Hofstra University found that prisoners have nearly the same level of entrepreneurial skills as those classified as “fast-growth” entrepreneurs. If those skills can be directed down avenues that are legal and moral, the ex-offender may be able to not only support himself but become a competitive success.

One of the premier prison-to-work programs in the U.S. tries to tap latent entrepreneurial talents. The Prison Entrepreneurship Program is headquartered in Houston, with a second office in Dallas. Uniting businessmen and churches, it uses the concepts of entrepreneurship and moral responsibility to encourage men to remake their lives, in ways that will dramatically reduce their chances of returning to prison after leaving.

PEP starts with the belief that reaching prisoners while they are still locked up is a key to ushering them into fruitful work. Most workforce reentry programs only kick in after the cell door has swung open. PEP connects people still in lock-up with successful businessmen who can serve as mentors.

CEO Bert Smith explains that “Having someone whom prisoners perceive as wildly successful coming in from the outside and showing them some love is an incredible experience. It’s not uncommon for us
to have men in our program who have not had a visit from a family member for years. To have somebody who they don’t know come in and spend an afternoon with them is really powerful. It can help them realize there is hope and a chance for a new start. We work from there.”

PEP recruits from prisoners who are within three years of their release date. They can’t have a sex-crime conviction, prison gang affiliation, or recent major disciplinary case. “We’re really looking for men who have decided that they want to make a change,” Smith says. “They just don’t know how.”

“Commitment to transformation is very important. It’s about learning who you are. Admitting and learning from your mistakes in the past. And developing a plan to avoid those mistakes in the future,” Smith continues. “We don’t want men who are looking for the ‘easy way out.’ That’s too often the mindset of the criminal. Personal transformation is hard work, and we’re only interested in investing in those men who are willing to invest in themselves.”

Many ex-offenders have what it takes to be an entrepreneur: independence, creativity, resilience.

Inmates from any Texas prison can apply. Those accepted are transferred to one of two facilities. PEP’s original home is the Cleveland Correctional Center, a medium-security, 520-bed facility about an hour north of Houston. The program’s second unit, the Estes Correctional Facility near Dallas, began service in August 2014.

PEP participants are first enrolled in a three-month education track. It provides character training and basic skills development, like computer literacy. PEP’s “Ten Driving Values,” which reflect Judeo-Christian principles, provide a moral foundation for the program.

The cornerstone of PEP’s instruction is the Business Plan Competition. Taught by PEP staff and business volunteers from the community, the course allows prisoners to plan high-quality entrepreneurial endeavors. The curriculum extends over six months, requires more than 1,000 hours of classroom time, hundreds of hours of homework, and offers college-level business training. It is offered twice a year to around 250 to 300 men each semester.
Each prisoner is paired with a volunteer business mentor who works with him on detailing his business vision. In addition to crafting the plan, each student must present and defend it in public. Inmates must make a 15-minute pitch to a panel of judges before they can graduate.

While prisoners are hard at work learning new life skills and mapping out a useful commercial enterprise, PEP is trying to build or renew a social structure for the prisoner to enter after his release. A prime goal of the program is reconciliation within the prisoner’s family. That is a gigantically helpful factor in making a successful transition back to freedom, but it can be challenging, since most prisoners’ families are fragmented and dysfunctional.

At the beginning of each semester, PEP collects contact information and then begins the process of finding family members and figuring out how best to communicate with them. They explain how the prisoner is working to turn his life around, and provide periodic updates on progress along the way. The goal is to have four family members attend the graduation ceremony for each man and see firsthand the changes he has made in his life.

Given its difficult population, PEP loses participants every semester. Some men drop out in the face of the difficult coursework. Others are expelled for behavioral violations. In the end, about 70 percent of the cohort who begin the program end up finishing.

PEP’s services don’t end after an inmate graduates, and certainly not after he leaves prison. There is evidence that the most vulnerable time for ex-offenders is the first few weeks after release. So PEP case managers pick up men on the day they are released and transport them to PEP-aranged transitional housing (for which the released person pays rent). Follow-up contact is ongoing. Graduates now living on their own can attend PEP’s Entrepreneurship School, or eSchool. This offers a range of two- and three-hour workshops on all aspects of being in business—marketing, sales, accounting, management, and more. These workshops are also combined with business networking events.

While entrepreneurship is PEP’s organizing principle, and a proven way of getting the attention of inmates, it isn’t particularly the goal of the program to generate new businesses, and only a portion of graduates actually found them. PEP has identified 120 businesses started by the 850 individuals who have graduated since the organization was started in 2004. Most of these were one-man owner-operated firms.

PEP training, however, puts released prisoners in a good position to be hired by some existing business. Since mid-2010, every PEP graduate
has secured a job within 90 days of his release. A recent survey of grads on the first anniversary of their release found 95 percent of them employed. Among average released prisoners, meanwhile, fully half are unemployed one year after getting out from behind bars.

Like other nonprofits helping struggling workers, one of PEP’s key procedures is to form lasting relationships with businesses in a position to offer its graduates jobs. PEP has met the most success with small- to medium-sized owner-operated companies. “The key is to introduce the CEO to some of our graduates,” says Smith. “That proves that they aren’t wide-eyed animals. They’re capable people ready to go to work, and in the vast majority of cases, very personable.”

As good as PEP’s job results are, what may be its most important result is non-economic. A careful, controlled analysis by Baylor University found that just 7 percent of 2009 PEP graduates had returned to crime after three years—while the three-year recidivism rate of all persons released from Texas prisons was 23 percent rate. In its ability to reduce the flow of released inmates back into illegal activity, PEP also beat every other one of the nine best rehabilitation programs run in Texas prisons. Finally, the Baylor researchers compared PEP graduates to former prisoners who had qualified for PEP but then gotten paroled before they had a chance to participate. This confirmed that PEP cuts the recidivism rate of its participants to less than a third of the level it would otherwise reach.

Strikingly, PEP is solely funded by donors and manned largely by executive, MBA, and church volunteers. One of PEP’s current philanthropic supporters is the Rockwell Fund. CEO Terry Bell says that early on, his foundation was not convinced that the PEP model would work. But the thoroughness with which PEP screens for the right applicants impressed the fund, and when they saw the data on the drop in recidivism they were sold. “PEP has done a great job of keeping people out of jail and giving them what they need most: the opportunity to become employed,” says Bell.

One ex-prisoner who came through the program and is now working as an instructor and fundraiser for WorkFaith Connection in Houston is Scott Wesley. “For me, the job was the icebreaker to ultimately reenter my children’s lives, provide health insurance and child-support payments for them, get my driver’s license again, and begin saving for retirement,” he explains. “These are little things that normal people do that make you feel a part of society. It begins with a job. That job is an entry point on so many levels.”
“Nothing speaks to the Prison Entrepreneurship Program’s success more powerfully than a single statistic,” argued a recent piece in the Houston Chronicle: “30 percent of the program’s donors in recent years are graduates. From felon to philanthropist—that’s a transformation worthy of support.” Two thirds of the PEP staff are also former inmates.

Center for Employment Opportunities
Headquartered in New York City with a presence extending around the country, the Center for Employment Opportunities is a nonprofit with a big footprint in the area of prisoner reentry. CEO has used local philanthropic support to add four new sites in upstate New York, three in California, and two in Oklahoma over the last half-dozen years.

CEO was founded by the Vera Institute of Justice as a demonstration project. Unlike PEP, which works both in prison and outside prison, CEO focuses on persons who have recently left lockup and are seeking work. CEO staff members collaborate with parole and probation officers to find the best participants for the program. “Those first 90 days are when people are most motivated, when they most need a job, but when it’s hardest to find a job,” says Sam Schaeffer, CEO’s executive director.

Former inmates practice good work skills in real jobs: showing up on time, cooperating with the supervisor and co-workers. At the end of each shift they are paid, so we’re drawing an immediate link between effort and outcome.

CEO places special emphasis on working with former prisoners between the ages of 18 to 25. These young adults haven’t had a whole life of crime, so there are better chances to redirect them into law-abiding work. Unlike the vast majority of successful job programs, CEO doesn’t screen intensively for a transformative attitude. If ex-offenders want a job, and are willing to show up for CEO’s orientation, then they are in. They are given multiple opportunities—if they drop out, they can come back later.

CEO’s New York City program begins with one week of life-skills education to ground participants in the fundamentals of being an
employee. Then participants get a pair of steel-toed boots and a work ID, and they immediately begin to work on CEO’s social enterprise: a maintenance and janitorial service that works in city agencies. In New York City alone, CEO now maintains 45 work crews. Branches in other areas run similar social ventures. In Tulsa, for instance, CEO workers work in recycling facilities and clean a community college. The revenues from these businesses subsidize the program.

“Former inmates practice good work skills in real jobs: showing up on time, cooperating with the supervisor and co-workers. At the end of each shift they are paid, so we’re drawing an immediate link between effort and outcome. They’re also being evaluated on these basic work behaviors,” Schaeffer explains.

Ex-offenders carry out this transitional work four days per week. On the fifth day they return to CEO offices for job instruction and counseling. Once a former inmate has demonstrated readiness to transition to a private-sector job, the staff begins to work with him on finding opportunities and arranging interviews. After placement in a job, the organization offers up to a year of services to keep things on track and suggest ways to advance.

CEO’s expansion to California was partially funded by grants from REDF and from the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation. When the organization moved into Oklahoma it got aid from the George Kaiser Family Foundation. Additional expansion is possible with philanthropic help.

RIDGE renews family relationships to build responsibility

Many of the people behind bars today have family members in the world outside who are in a position to suffer or prosper in tandem with them. The Sentencing Project reports that in 2009 more than 1.7 million children in the U.S. had an incarcerated parent. Linking these parents (most of them men) to work as soon as possible can have beneficial effects not only for the former prisoner but also for related women and children. Conversely, a released prisoner with a family support system is more likely to be successful economically, and to stay out of prison.

Headquartered in Ohio, the RIDGE Project works to retain and renew the relationships between prisoners and their families and to build on constructive overlaps between social success and job success. It has found a significant overlap in the skills that make a good spouse and parent and those that make a good employee and worker. Their
“family first” approach has attracted donors who are interested in tackling the twin problems of joblessness among ex-offenders and their lack of involvement in their children’s lives.

The RIDGE Project works to bolster fathering capacities and ambitions among incarcerated men, and then set them on a career path that can help them be a provider when they are released. “We work to stabilize the relationship, and then out of healthy families, we work to move them into workforce development,” says Cathy Tijerina, who co-founded the RIDGE Project with her husband, Ron, in the early 1990s. Ron was incarcerated for more than 15 years, so they speak from direct experience about the challenges of rebuilding lives after a criminal conviction. “What we’ve learned is that you can have all the skill in the world, but if you don’t have any character then you’re prone to continue in a cycle of destruction,” adds Ron Tijerina.

The RIDGE Project has three areas of focus: prevention, intervention, and redirection. The prevention element works with young people, mostly in schools, to help them avoid getting into trouble in the first place. Intervention focuses on fathers who are incarcerated or who are ex-offenders, strengthening their ties with family and connecting them to work. Redirection focuses on developing character and healthy habits and a positive mindset among prisoners.

Currently, the RIDGE Project works in 21 of Ohio’s 28 prisons. In its classes, the project uses the Latin concept of the “Tyro”—meaning a beginner or novice, but also describing a new warrior. There is a “rite of passage” emphasis, and encouragement of Tyro fraternities that use ex-cons to encourage and guide men coming through the system behind them. This helps graduates hold onto the life changes they have experienced and gives new trainees models they can believe in.

Tyro programming runs from nine to 18 weeks in different versions. About 80 classes are offered every week, inside and outside prisons. These aim to build new warriors who can succeed in life by strengthening their family, taking responsibility, and becoming financially able.
After completing this personal training, inmates participate in workforce instruction. This includes job ethics, plus specific vocational training. For instance, RIDGE has partnered with a trucking company to offer inmates classroom work leading to a commercial driver’s license. There is a welding track and one in the culinary arts. When inmates leave prison RIDGE helps place them in appropriate jobs.

RIDGE preps prisoners for hard realities. “We help them understand that, yes, they will have to work harder and they will have to prove themselves longer,” says Cathy Tijerina. “We help reinvent these men, who would otherwise be undesirable, unemployable, and unreliable,” says her husband. “The Tyro program creates a rite of passage that moves them from a learned helplessness to the great ‘what if?’ They become capable of being successful.”

The results: 270 men employed after completing the Tyro program, at an average wage of $13.14 per hour, with a 71 percent job retention rate after three months. The organization has a waiting list of 5,000 Ohio prisoners who want to participate. Word of mouth is the main way the organization advertises its services.

Some more models
We’ll close this chapter by listing a few other programs that donors might investigate when looking for models to help former prisoners enter working life. (And don’t forget the work-building charities mentioned in previous chapters—like Homeboy Industries and Taller San Jose—that have special focuses on strugglers with criminal pasts.)

• Specific prisons often have their own particular work programs. Some of these are very distinctive. The Sing Sing Correctional Facility located on the Hudson River north of New York City, for instance, has a program that allow inmates who have graduated from college to earn a master’s degree in theology. The program was created by the New York Theological Seminary in 1982, and since then more than 400 men have graduated. About 15 students participate each year in the one-year, 36-credit-hour course, which is 100-percent scholarship funded. Similar specialized degrees could be offered in other prisons, with donor support.

• Prison Fellowship is a nonprofit that provides a wide range of services to help prisoners redirect their lives in more constructive
directions, thanks to about $40 million of annual private support. It offers Christian counseling and services to inmates while they are locked up, assistance for inmate families, and re-entry guidance. Many of its efforts help local churches become involved in mentoring and assisting former prisoners in their area as they are released and in need of housing, jobs, and accountability.

- For the majority of released prisoners who are not involved in an intensive support program, simply knowing where to look for work is often the biggest struggle in starting their new life. A nonprofit called the Next Step has organized COFFE to help solve this problem. The Cooperative of Felon-Friendly Employers provides a national database of businesses that are willing to hire felons. It helps aid transitions by matching ex-cons, employers, and parole organizations.

- There are programs that are focused specifically on young people. Getting Out and Staying Out, founded in New York City by a retired business executive, works with minors and young adults ages 16 to 24. It has produced low rates of re-incarceration, with generous support from individual donors in the business world, and foundations like Achelis & Bodman. Fresh Lifelines for Youth in California is another organization that works to redirect kids who have become involved in the criminal justice system.