**Second Chance Month Reflection**

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**Reentry and Chances**

Second Chance Month has noble aims, and in many ways has strived to address the collateral consequences that extend long beyond a person’s release from incarceration.

A primary goal of Second Chance Month is to raise awareness on the challenges that individuals face when reentering society after incarceration, and to provide interventions that will enhance the likelihood of successful reentry. Contemplating these challenges, the scarcity of opportunities to adequately prepare for reentry during incarceration comes to mind. The impact and aspirations of Second Chance Month are undermined when people are released from prison with pennies, after being forced to perform unpaid or slave-wage labor for years on end.

Being released with a negligible amount of money doesn’t sound like a “second chance.” In fact, it doesn’t sound like a chance at all. If individuals were paid **fair wages for their work during incarceration** and were able to return to their community with that money, their reentry phase might feel more like a “chance”. As [the Second Chance Month proclamation](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2024/03/29/a-proclamation-on-second-chance-month-2024/) seeks to live up to its ideals or claims regarding reentry, I’d like to see people being released from prison with the financial and material resources necessary for a successful reentry.

**Higher Education in Prison**

With Pell Reinstatement, we expect an expansion of access to opportunities for incarcerated individuals to obtain a college level education. Yet they will not use that education to further their professional goals until their release. This means we have highly educated and able individuals, with an education funded by the federal government, who are not allowed to fully contribute to the workforce and then are being released with no money… These people are then expected to feel like they have a “chance.”

**A Solution**

Now that COVID has basically standardized remote work, we must reassess the feasibility of remote employment and careers for people who are incarcerated. In many respects, this could provide people with a genuine chance upon release, given that nationally there’s about a 70% “chance” that person will be rearrested within 5 years of their release [(Alper et al., 2018).](https://bjs.ojp.gov/library/publications/recidivism-prisoners-released-34-states-2012-5-year-follow-period-2012-2017)

We know that employing someone who is currently incarcerated is possible and that these employees can provide immense value. The Alliance for Higher Education in Prison, Jobs for the Future, and Unlocked Labs have benefited from employing incarcerated people with competitive wages.

**Children and Generational Considerations**

I can’t think about Second Chance Month without also considering first chances. Children of incarcerated parents are significantly squeezed of even having a first chance. One of the most significant consequences that a child of an incarcerated parent faces is a diminished economic wellbeing [(Travis, J., & Waul, M. 2017).](https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/articles/hidden-consequences-impact-incarceration-dependent-children#note22) Children should not have to suffer the strain of their parent not being allowed to provide financial support to them. More disturbingly, children who have an incarcerated parent are six times more likely to become incarcerated themselves.

**A Solution**

Enabling incarcerated parents to work and provide financial support to their children could help alleviate the cycle of generational incarceration and generational poverty. By addressing a root issue like this, which is directly related to the child’s first chance, we can move one step closer to NOT needing a Second Chance Month.  
  
**Final Thoughts**

About 70 million people in the U.S. have a criminal record… that’s a little over ⅕ of the American population, which is 1 in every 3 people [(National Conference of State Legislatures, 2023).](https://www.ncsl.org/civil-and-criminal-justice/criminal-records-and-reentry-toolkit#:~:text=Approximately%2077%20million%20Americans%2C%20or,housing%2C%20and%20higher%20education%20opportunities.) At the rates that people are being arrested, in 20 years the U.S. could easily see 35 - 40% of its population with criminal record. If we are going to look at second chances, as a nation, we’ll need to make some serious criminal legal reforms to alleviate the collateral consequences of having a criminal record, because more and more people are becoming disenfranchised, by what seems like the millisecond.

Overall, Second Chance Month is focused more on triaging the harms caused by a flawed criminal legal system than it is with the interventions that would prevent one from going into the system in the first place. If we are going to have a Second Chance Month, I think a First Chance Month seems appropriate as well. For millions of people (especially those living in poverty), barriers to first chances are just as hard to overcome as the barriers associated with second chances.

A society’s commitment to second chances, reveals much about its first. Second Chance Month is a reminder that we need to do better at making sure there's a first chance.

**References**

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