

Strengthening Public Educational Institutions: A More Humane Strategy for Reducing the Incarceration Rate



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In the early 1980s, while studying in the undergraduate criminal justice program at the University of Mississippi, I volunteered to participate in a field trip to the Parchment State Penitentiary in Sunflower County Mississippi. The reputation of the notorious Parchment “prison farm” has been the subject of books, films and songs such as “Life”(1999) the movie starring Eddie Murphy and Martin Lawrence, and “Parchman Farm Blues” (1940) performed by Bukka White.

This site experience afforded me the opportunity to see first hand the living conditions of the inmates, to hear the inmates’ personal stories of the factors they believed had contributed to their incarceration, and to enlighten my understanding of the effects incarceration had on the inmates. The wisdom I acquired during that visit and through my graduate criminal justice studies continues to inform my views on incarceration in two important ways.

First, the majority of individuals incarcerated in our jails and prisons can be classified into one or more of the following categories:

- **the poor**—The Bureau of Justice Statistics has indicated that 46.9 percent of state inmates with less than a high school education either lived in public housing and/or their parents received welfare.¹

- **those persons who do not possess a high school diploma or General Educational Development (GED) certificate**—According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, 69 percent of jail inmates, 75 percent of state inmates, and almost 59 percent of federal inmates did not complete high school.²

- **those persons serving time for a nonviolent crime**—Drug trafficking, drug possession, burglary and larceny are the most frequently identified nonviolent crimes. Three out of four state inmates leaving prison had served time for a nonviolent crime.³

- **victims and/or perpetrators of domestic violence**—The Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that over a tenth of men jail inmates said that they had been physically or sexually abused in the past, compared to over half of women jail inmates.⁴

- **persons of color**—According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, at Midyear 2004 the estimated percentage of males per 100,000 population in their late twenties incarcerated in prisons and jails was 12.6 percent black males, 3.6 percent Hispanic males, and 1.7 percent white males.⁵

Second, one of the most effective and humane ways to reduce the number of individuals who fit in the categories, listed above, from having to serve either a short-term and/or lifetime sentence is through the strengthening of our public educational institutions.

I am a firm believer that the “knowledge” we acquire throughout our life cycles can be empowering and liberating. During the early formative years of our lives, we begin to develop values that can affect the choices we make in life. Our homes and schools are two of the environments that play a key role in shaping the values that we adopt during these formative years. Unfortunately, many of the individuals who are locked-up in our local jails and prisons are here because they did not acquire either through their homes, communities and/or school environments the kind of skills and values that could have helped them mature into productive youths and adults in their communities and society. For example, many of these individuals did not learn to view the challenges and conflicts that they experienced in their homes, communities and/or schools as learning opportunities. If they had, perhaps they would have been more determined to do everything within their powers to complete their high school studies. Why? They would have done so to decrease the odds of their engaging in any kind of activity that could land them behind bars.

This article looks at the impact of a lack of quality education and the likelihood of individuals becoming incarcerated. The article offers strengthening public educational institutions through advocacy as a more humane strategy for reducing the incarceration rate.

The General Assemblies of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and its predecessor denominations, have been long-time advocates for quality public educational institutions for all children. Actions taken by the General Assemblies to promote this vision include the following:

- . . . schools in every community should provide compensatory education for disadvantaged children that will help equalize their opportunities.⁶
- Affirm[ed] clearly the historic position of the PCUS in support of public education and the conditions that promote high quality in public education systems.⁷
- Presbyterians are called to join others in their communities to provide public schools that will secure for all children an education that develops their capacities to serve as creative and responsible persons in the common life⁸

- Education is a basic human right and is essential to human development because it enhances human capacities, improves opportunities, and widens the range of choices.⁹

Unfortunately, the educational vision that this denomination and its predecessor bodies have advocated for is so far from becoming a reality for many young people living in the United States. Instead of expanding their minds through studying in healthy public school environments, many of this nation's young people are dropping out of high school. Consequently, at some point during their lives, many of these same youths eventually will find themselves locked-up in either a local jail and/or prison near and/or far away from their families and communities of support.

In January 2003, the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) of the United States Department of Justice published a report entitled "Education and Correctional Populations." This report stated that the estimated number of state prison inmates without a high school education or General Educational Development (GED) certificate increased from 293,000 in 1991 to 420,600 in 1997.¹⁰ In addition, the report noted that minority state inmates were less likely to have earned a high school diploma or GED certificate than white state inmates were.¹¹ Another interesting finding included in the report was that academic problems, behavior problems, or loss of interest were reasons cited by over one third of the jail inmates and one sixth of the general population as the main reason they quit school.¹² Coincidentally, in *The Condition of Education 2005*, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) indicated that all teachers surveyed for this study cited problem behavior of the students as one of the top reasons they had decided to transfer and/or leave the schools where they taught in 1999-2000 for different schools in 2000-2001.¹³

The findings of the reports cited above suggest to this writer that there is still much more public policy advocacy work for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to be engaged in to ensure that strong educational institutions become a viable strategy for reducing the incarceration rate.

Many public schools are *underfunded*. In the United States, schools and colleges receive 90 percent of their funds from state, local and private sources. The federal government contributes only 10 percent toward national education expenditures.¹⁴ However, any educational budget cut made at the local, state or national levels of government can be devastating for educators as they search for ongoing creative programs that can challenge and make learning more exciting for students. Therefore, the members of the faith community must participate in advocacy work at the local, state and national levels to ensure that adequate educational funding is provided.

In a recent Press Release, the U.S. Census Bureau stated: "U.S. public school districts spent an average of \$8,287 per student in 2004, up from the previous year's total of \$8,019."¹⁵ I commend these public school districts for spending these additional funds on each of their students. However, this statistic still is very disheartening because in 2001 the annual operating cost per state inmate alone was \$22,650.¹⁶ What might happen if a portion of the funds allocated on each state inmate were diverted to the public school districts?

In “Education and Incarceration,” the authors state: “By diverting funds spent on prisons to support a high quality education system and communities most impacted by high crime and high incarceration, policymakers can diminish one of the key factors associated with risk of incarceration—lower education attainment, and school failure.”¹⁷ By diverting funds spent on jails and prisons to support public schools, policymakers also will be assisting the leaders of these institutions in their efforts to create a more conducive educational environment for students and teachers.

In conclusion, this writer believes that the data presented in this article offer evidence that suggests the members of the faith community, members of other institutions and organizations must continue to advocate for adequate annual educational funding at the local, state and national levels. It is important for faith communities to work in collaboration with other organizations such as local, state, and national school board associations on public policy educational issues to ensure that the policymakers are hearing strong representative voices as they make decisions on the appropriation of resources for schools and colleges. Furthermore, if the members of the faith community do not continue to speak up for quality educational programs for all children (especially K-12 students), through our silence we may miss out on a very important opportunity to advocate for adequate resources that could be used to strengthen our public educational institutions. Resources that can make all the difference in the world as to whether or not a young person completes high school and/or earns a GED certificate, which in turn will significantly decrease her or his chances of being incarcerated. Is this not a more humane strategy for reducing the incarceration rate?

Notes

1. Caroline Wolf Harlow, “Education and Correctional Populations,” Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Washington: D.C., January 2003, NCJ 195670, Revised April 2003, p. 8. For a complete copy of this report, please see <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/ecp.pdf>.
2. Ibid., p.3.
3. Matthew R. Durose and Christopher J. Mumola, “Profile of Nonviolent Offenders Exiting State Prisons,” Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Washington: D.C., October 2004, NCJ 207081, p. 1. For a complete copy of this report, please see <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/pnoesp.pdf>.
4. Doris J. James, “Profile of Jail Inmates, 2002,” Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Washington, D.C., July 2004, NCJ 201932, Revised October 2004, p. 1. For a complete copy of this report, please see <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/pji02.pdf>.
5. Paige M. Harrison and Allen J. Beck, “Prison and Jail Inmates at Midyear 2004,” Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Washington, D.C., April 2005, NCJ 208801, p.1. For a complete copy of this report, please see <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/pjim04.pdf>.

6. *Minutes*, United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, 1972, Part I, p. 1025.
7. *Ibid.*, Presbyterian Church in the United States, 1978, Part I, p. 232.
8. *Ibid.*, 1987, Part I, pp. 479-480.
9. *Ibid.*, 1996, Part I, p. 532.
10. Caroline Wolf Harlow, "Education and Correctional Populations," Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Washington: D.C., January 2003, NCJ 195670, Revised April 2003, p. 3. For a complete copy of this report, please see <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/ecp.pdf>.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
13. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, (2005), *The Condition of Education (2005)* NCES 2005-094, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, pp. 18-19. For a complete copy of this report, please see http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/2005/pdf/2005_analysis.pdf.
14. For more information on "The Federal Role in Education," please see <http://www.ed.gov/about/overview/fed/role.html>.
15. U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Census Bureau News, "National Spending Per Student Rises to \$8,287," Monday, April 3, 2006. For a complete copy of this report, please see http://www.census.gov/PressRelease/www/releases/archives/economic_surveys/006685.html.
16. James J. Stephan, "State Prison Expenditures, 2001," Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Washington, D.C., June 2004, NCJ 202949. For a full copy of this report, please see <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/spe01.pdf>.
17. Bruce Western, Vincent Schiraldi and Jason Ziedenberg, "Education and Incarceration," Washington, DC: Justice Policy Institute, August 2003, p. 11. For a full copy of this report, please see http://www.soros.org/initiatives/justice/articles_publications/publications/education_incarceration_20030828/EducationIncarceration1.pdf.

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