

ALL I SEE IS THE FUTURE



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Discussion Guide

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Seeing Beyond a Criminal Record

by Darrin Sims

INTRODUCTION

A few years ago, I had the opportunity to organize a local expungement clinic in collaboration with the Office of the Solicitor-General in Fulton County, Georgia and congregations from multiple faith traditions. Expungement allows for a record of criminal conviction to be destroyed or sealed from state or federal record. To facilitate the expungement process, we enlisted local congregation members to create "record summaries." These summaries allowed attorneys to quickly review a person's record and determine which charges were eligible for restriction. During training, I realized that teaching people how to read a criminal record was crucial to facilitating expungements. Criminal records fail to tell a person's full story, and assumptions can lead to misjudgments. This reflection explains the importance of understanding criminal records and suggests ways to help individuals with records reintegrate into society.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CRIMINAL RECORDS

Criminal records, commonly called "rap sheets," contain a comprehensive history of a person's arrestable offenses, including those requiring fingerprinting. The emergence of the criminal record system started with the federal campaign against drugs in the 1980s. During this period, states received large amounts of federal funding to create databases detailing every individual's contact with law enforcement agencies and the courts, including arrests, detentions, and convictions. The creation of this system enhanced the punitive nature of the criminal justice system because a person's record is now able to be accessed by employers, landlords, and virtually anyone at any time.

Unfortunately, once something is on a criminal record, it is difficult to remove. Individuals burdened with criminal records face numerous barriers to securing employment, accessing suitable housing, participating in civic engagement, and more. To illustrate the extent of the issue, approximately 48,000 laws in the United States create economic and social obstacles for individuals re-entering society. Furthermore, 86% of employers consider an applicant's criminal record when making hiring decisions, which significantly impedes returning citizens from obtaining gainful employment (Aamodt, 2015). Shockingly, over 73 million people in the United States—equivalent to roughly twice the population of California—currently possess a record of past criminal history (Clark, 2017). These records trigger collateral consequences, affecting various aspects of life including education, professional licenses, housing, social services, parental rights, freedom of movement, and voting rights. Notably, these restrictions disproportionately impact Black individuals due to profound racial disparities within the criminal punishment system.

THE IMPACT OF CLEARING CRIMINAL RECORDS

In *All I See Is the Future*, we see firsthand how a criminal record impacted Bryant Pearson's journey to meaningful employment. Dr. Carolyn Powell, O.D. shared the fears and stereotypes she had about hiring a man with a criminal record. Dr. Powell gave Pearson a chance anyway, but most employers will not. Clearing criminal records is key to unlocking a brighter future for individuals with records. Employment is vital to creating stability and reintegrating into society. Research demonstrates that steady employment can lead to a remarkable 62% reduction in recidivism among individuals with records (Yu, 2018). Clearing one's record can increase the likelihood of obtaining employment by 11% within the first year and boost wages by 22%. On average, record expungement results in an annual income increase of \$6,190 per individual.

Removing this barrier allows for the greatest impact on individuals' lives. I have spoken with many returning citizens and they tell me that the most important thing that they desire when they come home is employment. They want to put their lives back together and take care of their families.

HOW YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

If you are passionate about supporting individuals with records and promoting second chances, here are some practical steps you can take:

- 1 Organize a local expungement event - Collaborate with legal authorities and community organizations to host record expungement clinics that allow individuals to clear their records and start anew.
- 2 Advocate for second chance hiring - Engage with local businesses and chambers of commerce to promote policies that encourage employers to consider job applicants based on their qualifications rather than solely focusing on their criminal records.
- 3 Work with reentry groups - Collaborate with local reentry organizations to advocate for simplified and accessible paths to expungement, ensuring that individuals with records have the opportunity to rebuild their lives.
- 4 Support returning citizens through faith communities - Encourage congregations to hold special worship services dedicated to welcoming and supporting individuals returning home from prison, fostering a sense of belonging, and providing vital community networks.

THE IMPACT OF CLEARING CRIMINAL RECORDS

Understanding criminal records goes beyond facilitating expungements; it is about challenging assumptions and acknowledging that these records do not always tell the full story. By advocating for comprehensive criminal justice reform, promoting second-chance hiring, and offering support to returning citizens, we can ensure that all persons, even those who have made mistakes, are able to live and create the life that they want and more importantly deserve.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1 Should the criminal justice system prioritize punishment or rehabilitation? Why? Is it feasible to design a system that incorporates both punitive and rehabilitative elements? What would be your desired outcome for someone who has committed a crime against you or a member of your family?
- 2 Would you find it challenging to collaborate with individuals who have a criminal record? Are there specific types of crimes that might pose more difficulty for you? Explain the reasons behind your perspective.
- 3 Many job applications include questions about felony convictions and background checks are commonplace. Therefore, individuals released from prison often face significant barriers in securing legitimate employment. Should all individuals with felony records be obligated to disclose them to prospective employers upon request? What alternative policies can help returning citizens to sustain themselves and their families through lawful employment?

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Reflection on Prison Reform

by Dr. Brandy Scombordi-Raghu

In the film, *All I See is The Future*, Dr. Carolyn Powell hires Bryant Pearson, knowing he was formerly incarcerated. Dr. Powell hires him because of his persistence and a hunch. She takes a chance on this young man and turns his life around. The true beauty of this story is how he turns her life around. When watching the documentary, it is easy to be impressed with Pearson's charisma and work ethic. But it was while watching Dr. Powell discuss her acceptance of Pearson that I was brought to tears. I am not naive enough to believe that every person who leaves the prison system will be a Bryant Pearson. But I want to believe that we all can be Dr. Carolyn Powell; it takes an open heart, a keen eye, and faith in our fellow human beings.

Salus University's Looking Out For Kids (LOFK) initiative has provided vision care services to uninsured or underinsured children in the Philadelphia region since 2007. The program assists overworked school nurses with performing vision screenings in their schools. In an ideal situation, when a child fails their vision screening, they are referred to a local optometrist or ophthalmologist to receive a comprehensive vision exam and a pair of glasses, if needed. Upon failing this screening, many children in the Philadelphia region cannot receive that much-needed vision care. Approximately 26% of school children in the United States need glasses. This is one out of every four children who cannot perform in the classroom without a pair of glasses. Eighty-six percent of learning is through vision. LOFK is a nonprofit, funded mainly by private donors. LOFK performs vision exams and provides two pairs of glasses for children with unmet vision needs, usually due to economic disadvantage.

The last two years, LOFK has collaborated with the Pennsylvania Correctional Industries, which has been training incarcerated women in a state prison in Northwestern Pennsylvania to become opticians. The students train in the classroom for a year with lab work. Upon completion, they work in the fully functioning optical lab within the prison and they can test for the American Board of Opticianry Certification. The students receive training to measure eyewear and fabricate all types of lenses on many different lens edgers (the machine which makes the lenses that are put into glasses). They are also taught to read the lenses and dispense the glasses.

Our partnership has been an amazing experience for me. I have met brilliant, hard-working women who are trying to turn their lives around and need a chance to show their worth. By working as opticians, they have been able to make glasses for kids and teens who also need an opportunity to show their worth.

I am surprised to find myself in the position of advocating for the previously incarcerated. I am such an extreme rule follower. However, I also know what it is like to be down and out. I grew up in a small coal mining town. The mines closed years ago, and job opportunities and local economy suffered. No one realized who was poor because everyone was poor. People were often desperate, frustrated, and made mistakes. You cared for your neighbor and forgave them. You gave them a second, third, and fourth chance.

The partnership with the Department of Corrections has taught me to extend that understanding by forgiving those outside my neighborhood and small town.

I am not an expert on the formerly incarcerated. But after performing thousands of eye exams and serving countless hours with community nonprofits, I am an expert on recognizing people who want to better themselves and make a difference. I try to see people for who they are. Most of the time, all people want is to provide for themselves and their families. For that reason, I have found that returning citizens are quite often hard-working and determined.

Yet the difficulties returning citizens face are immense. Returning citizens who possess American Board of Opticianry certification have skills and a trade that many leaving prison do not. A study by the Brookings Institution (2018) found that returning citizens with full-time employment are less likely to return to prison. Many cities and the Federal Government have programs to incentivize the hiring of returning citizens. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce (2022) offers numerous resources to help businesses and organizations implement “second-chance hiring.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1 There are many reasons a job applicant may be passed over. Dr. Powell addressed her biases and took a chance on Bryant Pearson. How could, or do, your biases affect hiring processes? How can you acknowledge your biases and overcome them?
- 2 In the movie *All I See is the Future*, what changes do you see in each character for better or worse as their relationship develops?
- 3 Would you hire an applicant who was previously incarcerated? How, if at all, did the film impact your answer?

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Connecting with Religion and Spirituality While in Prison

by Ray Boyd

INTRODUCTION

Incarceration is a life-changing experience that can profoundly impact one's sense of self and spiritual life. Spirituality can help individuals to find peace and balance even in the most challenging circumstances. This reflection evidences how spirituality can help individuals during their incarceration and following their release, and demonstrates the importance of community support in meeting these spiritual and emotional needs.

CONNECTING WITH SPIRITUALITY DURING INCARCERATION

Prison can be lonely and isolating, making it difficult for individuals to experience spiritual connection. However, many incarcerated people find solace in their faith and use it to cope with the challenges of incarceration. For some, this means attending religious services or participating in prayer groups. For others, it may involve meditation, yoga, or other spiritual practices.

Upon entering prison, I found it difficult to embrace religion because of my upbringing. I was the son of a single mother whose cultural worldviews were deeply rooted in the principles of the Black Panther Party. I relinquished the idea of God early in my incarceration because I was not brought up with Christian beliefs or depictions of Jesus on the walls of my house. Organized religion was not a route I was willing to take to have a relationship with God. But I knew I needed a personal connection with that someone/something to bring my life out of the darkness that I began experiencing at such a young

I started reading the Bible, and Proverbs 2:6 stood out for me. It states, "For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth comes knowledge and understanding." My self-understanding increased, and I began to understand better how to navigate all the negative circumstances I faced. I had to come to terms with the fact that I did not know what I did not know. I desired knowledge, wisdom, and understanding, and I knew that I did not want to ever put myself in a position to be controlled mentally by anyone else. When I found myself faced with any given situation, I reflected, "What would God do?"

Connecting with spirituality during incarceration can also help individuals maintain a sense of purpose and meaning. It can provide a framework for understanding their experiences and offer hope for the future. For example, practicing forgiveness and compassion can help individuals overcome anger and resentment toward others; developing a sense of gratitude can help individuals to focus on the positive aspects of their lives.

MEETING SPIRITUAL AND EMOTIONAL NEEDS AFTER RELEASE

After being released from prison, individuals face several challenges as they try to reintegrate into society. These challenges include finding stable housing, employment, and reconnecting with family and friends. However, the most significant challenge for many individuals is maintaining their spiritual and emotional well-being.

When I was released from my term of incarceration at age 49, I already knew I would be tested spiritually. This is a test that all men and women face upon release, particularly as 99.99% of us are returning to the same family, friends, homes, neighborhoods, and environments that played a critical role in our pathways to prison. I struggled spiritually when my weaknesses, namely money, cars, and women, were tested. I faced these challenges head-on and viewed the entire process as one of temperance. Let me explain. I was incarcerated for 30 years, and I was the potter of my life. My mentality was like formless clay that I worked and prepared for its return. I was destined to be a better version of myself. However, after working on myself for so long and feeling a healthy sense of pride about the man I had become, my release was the test to see if I was going to crack and crumble under the enormous pressure of being back in society.

The first 90 days of freedom following release are the most critical for determining if one will return to old behaviors or choose a better path in life. I have already beaten those odds five times over thanks to my spiritual foundation and the community support I received.

Community support is essential to achieving spiritual and emotional well-being following release. Communities can provide access to religious and spiritual services, counseling and support groups. Additionally, community members can serve as mentors and role models, providing guidance and support as returning citizens navigate their new lives outside of prison.

MEETING SPIRITUAL AND EMOTIONAL NEEDS AFTER RELEASE

One of the most significant benefits of maintaining a spiritual connection with self and others is its potential to reduce recidivism. Research has shown that incarcerated individuals who participate in religious and spiritual activities are less likely to re-offend after release. This may be due, in part, to the sense of purpose and meaning that spirituality provides, as well as the social support and sense of community that comes with religious and spiritual practice.

THE IMPORTANCE OF BALANCE

It is important to recognize that spirituality is just one aspect of an individual's overall well-being. While it can be a powerful tool for coping with the challenges of incarceration and life after prison, it is important to maintain balance in all areas of one's life. This includes physical health, social connections, and emotional well-being.

CONCLUSION

Whatever our spiritual or religious tradition may be, our actions must align with our thoughts. Every human is tested in their individual areas of weakness, not their strengths. After becoming more spiritually inclined while in prison, I knew that my real test of faith would come upon my release. Since my release, I have been able to be steadfast and rooted in my spirituality. All returning citizens need a spiritual guide or mentor to provide support on the spiritual path after release.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1 How can the support of a religious or spiritual community contribute to the successful reintegration of returning citizens following their release?
- 2 How can religion and spirituality provide a sense of purpose, hope, and moral guidance for formerly incarcerated individuals? How can religion and spirituality enhance their rehabilitation and reduce the likelihood of reoffending?
- 3 What role can community-based religious and spiritual organizations play in helping returning citizens to overcome the challenges they face upon reentry?

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