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Repairing the Broken Conveyor Belt Setting the Stage for IJJ's 21st Century Criminal Justice Conference

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Recently, I asked LAPD Deputy Chief Charlie Beck what accounted for his transformation from a hard-nosed old-line cop into an innovative, big-picture police leader.

“Initially you start out,” he replied, “and all you care about are the nuts and bolts of what you’re doing. And then, after you become more comfortable with the nut and bolts, you start wondering: Why does this conveyer belt keep bringing me all these same broken parts, and how can I find out what’s going on there, on the other side of the conveyer?”

The purpose of the Justice and Journalism conference in January is for L.A.’s criminal justice professionals and experts to discuss what they see taking place on the other side of the Los Angeles criminal justice conveyer belt – a belt that never stops. Over 30% of those moving into the state’s overstuffed prison system come from L.A. County. After doing their time, tens of thousands return each year to Los Angeles – the majority having received little or no educational help, mental health care, treatment for drug or alcohol abuse, or other services while in prison. When they arrive here and hit the streets, there is no serious, sustained and coordinated reentry strategy to assist them. It’s no wonder that 70% are placed back on the conveyer belt and returned to prison within three years following their release.

At the same time, L.A. County jails remain so overcrowded that some inmates are forced to sleep on cold concrete floors without mattresses, and many prisoners wind up serving only a fraction of their sentences before being released due to overcrowding.

Simultaneously, the system’s working parts – its police, courts and jails, the D.A. and Public Defender’s offices and Probation Department – too often remain disconnected, operating like separate silos without a unified set of data-driven goals and end-game outcomes, or a step-by-step, holistic strategy for dealing with an offender from arrest through reentry.

Meanwhile, L.A.’s politicians and criminal justice professionals have lacked the policy vision and managerial imagination needed to create a unified lobbying strategy to pressure state lawmakers into reforming parole policies that have led to a California corrections system with more than 300,000 inmates and parolees. Nor have they shown the political will necessary to moderate mandatory-minimum sentencing laws for nonviolent crimes and drug offenses that lie at the heart of a state prison system holding twice its maximum capacity.

Worried about being labeled “soft on crime” or denied the campaign dollars of powerful law enforcement special-interest political-players, such as the California District Attorney’s Association, the California Correctional Peace Officers Association and the police unions, many have ceded the field to them, or to the law-and-order hard-liners with one-suit-fits-all solutions to complex questions – instead of being the full-throated advocates for smart, data-based, results-oriented public policy that their professional principles and the public trust demands.

Instead, California’s politicians have led the way in abandoning drug-treatment, education and rehabilitative prison and parole programs while imposing the nation’s toughest, longest prison sentences. As a result, the state’s prison population has skyrocketed 580% in 20 years, sending as many as 70% of parolees back to prison annually – many not for new crimes, but for technical parole violations.

The media in Los Angeles have sometimes been equally remiss – particularly local television news, talk radio and the cable news networks – by promoting “super-predator” stories that titillate and promote fear at the expense of the reality of who is actually in the criminal justice system and why.

The consequences are an ever-accelerating criminal justice budget for a cash-strapped Los Angeles, a California corrections system now costing taxpayers more than \$10 billion a year and a public largely ignorant of how the criminal justice system actually operates.

The problem, of course, isn’t limited to just L.A. or California. More than 13.5 million people have been incarcerated on felony convictions nationwide, and about 640,000 inmates are being released from prisons across the country every year. As in Los Angeles, few have even the most basic survival skills to make it on the outside, and many are suffering from mental and/or severe addiction problems. As they’re processed out, most are left to fend for themselves, and forced to face laws denying them driver’s licenses, parental and voting rights, and access to public housing, student loans and food stamps.

Today, 40% of the nation’s prisoners are African Americans, who comprise only 12% of the population. Recent studies by experts at Harvard, Columbia and Princeton have documented just how trapped and prison-bound are many of the young black men living in cities like Los Angeles. Half of them are high school dropouts, and 72% of those dropouts between the ages of 22-30 are unemployed. By the time they reach their mid-30s, 60% will have spent time in prison. And if current trends continue, 1 in 3 of all black males born today will do time in prison – meaning they will spend at least one year behind bars for a felony conviction.

Currently more than 7 million Americans are either in jail, in prison, on probation or parole – and approximately 1 in 19 men is under some form of correctional supervision at any given moment. The United States leads the world with more than 2.2 million people under lock and key – the most inmates both per capita and in total number of any other country, including China, which has one billion more people.

America is now in the process of developing a permanent, intergenerational criminal class. Forty-seven percent of all prisoners have a relative who has previously been incarcerated. Ten million American children have a parent in the corrections system. They are five times more likely to later be incarcerated than kids whose parents have not been imprisoned. Most are from big cities like L.A. Nine percent of California's children – 876,000 kids – now have a parent in prison.

Meanwhile, America's, California's and L.A.'s inmate populations continue to grow, despite the fact that America has been spending about \$200 billion a year during the past decade on police, courts and incarceration. This year California's long-awaited answer to the state's crushing prison overcrowding came from the governor and state Legislature. It was loud and clear: plan for more failure by building more prisons for a projected 23,000 *additional* prisoners over the next five years; and ensure that mass imprisonment as a way of dealing not only with our violent and serious criminals – but with our mentally ill, addicted and economically impoverished as well – continues as our local and state policies.

Nevertheless, I would maintain that there is cause for optimism in Los Angeles in the persons of an educated criminal justice leadership and a rank and file open to change, willing to acknowledge the growing challenges the system faces, and increasingly cognizant of the fact that, as LAPD Chief William Bratton has often repeated, “we can't arrest our way out of the problem.”

It is in a spirit of challenging the conventional wisdom that has dominated criminal justice policy in America over the past two decades – and in searching for better answers, better reporting and a more accountable media – that USC Annenberg's Institute for Justice and Journalism has organized this conference.

We look forward to your participation.