

There are times when nothing useful comes from prison time

Dan Rodricks

March 3, 2009

I talk to a lot of guys who just came home from prison - within the last week, the last month or the last year. They're looking for a job. They call here almost every day because someone - maybe a counselor at a drug treatment center, or a probation officer or cop or girlfriend - will tell them I have a magic list of Baltimore-area companies that have a record of hiring ex-offenders. The list is a few years old now. It's hardly magic. Still, when requested, I mail it to a guy looking for work.

Sometimes, I hear back, and the news is good.

A lot of times, I hear nothing.

Other times, I hear that my list is out of date, and do I have any more leads?

It's tough. Hiring ex-offenders is not something a lot of companies do, and most of those who are willing to do so won't admit it to a newspaper; they don't want their employees or customers - or their insurance agents and lawyers - to know about it.

So, only a few employers have contacted me to get their names on the list that I mail out. In fact, in the four years that I've been doing this, the ratio of jobseekers to companies willing to be listed as hiring ex-offenders must be 300-to-1.

Or it could be 500-to-1 now. I've lost track.

I'm sure it will get worse before it gets better, like everything else in this economy.

Yesterday, I spoke to a 26-year-old guy named Aaron. He didn't want me to use his name in print or to identify where he lives because he lives with his mother and there are guys with whom he had altercations in prison that he would like to continue to avoid.

"Everything about you is in the criminal database, and anyone can get it through the Internet," he complains. "People want all that information out there to make the community aware of who's living where. But you don't realize, a bunch of us are still living with our relatives, and that information makes innocent people vulnerable."

Aaron makes it sound as if he fears retribution from days as a big-time drug dealer, caught up in a violent, heroin-peddling gang in the city.

Hardly.

The last time he went to prison - in either late 2005 or early 2006 - it was on a marijuana conviction. A Baltimore County judge sent him away for three years for possession of marijuana with intent to distribute it. He had 24 small bags of grass on him when the police caught him. His arrest constituted a violation of probation.

"I did 2 1/2 years on a three-year bit," he says. "If you look on my record, there's a lot of different stuff from when I was younger."

Imagine this: The state budget situation in Maryland is so bad that even \$3.7 billion in federal stimulus won't be enough to spare additional cuts in staffing and services, and that includes the state prison system. I guess that, back in the good ole days, when the treasury was flush with revenue, we could afford to send guys to prison for 2 1/2 years for selling marijuana. No wonder we lead the world in incarceration per capita. No wonder our prisons are full.

This Aaron sounds like a bright enough guy. He seems earnest. He says he avoided joining gangs while in prison and, though still unemployed, he doesn't intend to go out to find marijuana to sell. "No way," he says. "I have five years' [probation] hanging over my head, and I value my freedom, man." Great. Maybe he's learned his lesson.

But he hasn't worked but one week in the nine months since his release - and that was for a temp agency that sent him to a warehouse job. When I asked Aaron where he'd applied for a job since then, he rattles off a long list of national retailers, most of which have reported losses and announced layoffs in the past year.

"They say they're not hiring or reviewing applications," he says. "But I know they're not hiring me because of my record."

Even if, in the first place, it made sense to send this guy to prison, nothing useful came of his time there. He had no vocational training, no preparation for re-entry from prison life. It cost Maryland taxpayers about \$25,000 a year to keep him in the prisons he mentioned yesterday.

What was the point?

Questioning spending on prisons is not the most politically popular thing to do. That's why almost no one does it, including Democrats regarded as liberals. But you'd think that the new economic reality - this age of supposedly heightened responsibility in government - would force Maryland and all its Obama-supporting Democrats into a little self-examination. Why are we putting anyone with an opiate addiction behind the walls when what they need is medical treatment? Is 50 percent an acceptable rate of recidivism? Why are we just warehousing criminals instead of preparing them for re-entry and a job? What are we doing, sending guys to prison for selling a few bags of marijuana?

It made no sense in good times. It makes none in bad.

Copyright © 2009, [The Baltimore Sun](#).