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Melvin Delgado. Reviewed by Marguerite G. Rosenthal.**

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Melvin Delgado, *Prisoner Reentry at Work: Adding Business to the Mix* (2012). Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers. \$58 (hardcover).

That the U.S. prison population has skyrocketed in the last 20 years has begun to be widely discussed among sociologists, legal scholars, practitioners, and even the public at large. But the hard circumstances that former prisoner face when they leave prison has been much less studied. This is Melvin Delgado's concern, and he has written a relatively short book (188 pages plus references) to highlight both the difficulties that this population faces and two examples of programs that are successful in providing ex-prisoners with community and work while preventing recidivism. Delgado, a professor of social work at Boston University, shows his compassion for this denigrated population and shows that, given appropriate supports, its members have or can develop skills to become productive members of society.

The first three chapters of the book, *Returning Ex-Offenders to Society*, *Community Reentry*, and *Employment Issues*, review the literature to document what is known about the challenges facing prisoners who return to the "free world" (a term not used in the book but one commonly found in criminology literature). Citing findings that, in 2006, about 713,000 prisoners were discharged from state and federal prisons and that, at least in some states and provoked by the states' budget crises, releases are being stepped up, Delgado documents the many ways in which prisoners are unprepared to undertake crime-free lives: rehabilitation, educational and vocational training programs in prisons have all but disappeared; drug addictions, very common among prisoners, and mental illnesses go untreated; and family ties have frequently attenuated. Then there are structural barriers to successful reentry: federal laws make it unlawful for ex-felons to live in public housing, even if their families reside there; private landlords discriminate against them, too; there are restrictions against receiving food stamps; legal barriers prevent former prisoners from doing some kinds of work; ex-prisoners cannot vote in many states; and employers pervasively refuse to hire anyone with a prison record (easily researched online). And, because

the great majority of prisoners are either African-American or Hispanic, racism is an additional burden to reintegration into society. The barriers to employment are described as the principle reason that ex-prisoners fail. The predictable consequence is, too commonly, a return to crime and the prison.

Chapters 4 and 5 are devoted to detailed and laudatory descriptions of two innovative and forward-looking programs, Homeboy/Homegirl Industries and the Delancy Street Foundation, respectively. Both of these organizations were started in California by dynamic innovators whose approaches have established models of housing, skill development, self-help, entrepreneurship, self-governance, and mutuality in populations ignored by society in general and often given to mistrust among themselves. Delgado appreciates the knowledge and skills that ex-prisoners either have or are capable of developing, and his book is successful in giving them the "voice" that he describes as being too generally ignored.

Chapter 6, only 5 pages long, entitled "Implications for Practice," calls on professionals to adopt flexible and comprehensive approaches to working with former prisoners; he again touts the success of the aforementioned social enterprises and suggests that they form the basis of a new, proactive reentry approach.

The final chapter, 7, calls upon criminologists and the helping professions to adopt a paradigm shift from viewing ex-inmates as suffering from deficits to possessing assets that only need to be tapped. The "strengths perspective" popular in social work literature is thus to be applied to this population, one that has been largely abandoned by social work. Research in this field, similarly, should be informed by former prisoners themselves, a position maintained by the author that seems both sensible and humane.

Prisoner Reentry at Work is most useful for students and practitioners interested in knowing more about and working with or developing programs for prison-leavers. It is not without its flaws, however. The writing is often repetitious and is frequently dominated by long quotes from other sources, particularly from what seem to be promotional materials of Homeboy/Homegirl Industries and The Delancy Street Foundation. Of greater concern, the author provides almost no

material about the role of public policy, except those (housing restrictions, denial of public benefits, e.g.) that impede ex-prisoners' ability to survive outside of prison. A section entitled "A Role for Government" consists of only two paragraphs that concludes that the private sector cannot shoulder the burden of reentry on its own. The two voluntary programs highlighted in the book are inspiring, but no empirical outcome data are presented and, in any case, successful replications are unlikely. More attention to what pro-active public policy for this significant population should look like would have strengthened the book; this is a policy arena crying out for attention.

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