

Envision Board Member Jim Golembeski reviews

***Men Without Work* by Nicholas Eberstadt**

And offers thoughts about the Wisconsin corrections system

Continued here...

Eberstadt's book provides a wealth of data stretching from the end of World War II to the present day to support his premise and the negative effects it has on our national economy. While he reaches several conclusions from the data, including poorly thought-out government policy, he focuses on two particular factors as contributing significantly to this situation:

- *The scope and availability of disability support payments through programs such as SSI, SSDI, and veterans' benefits;*
- *The large number of men in America with felony convictions who struggle to find decent employment, or in some cases, any employment at all.*

Those of you who know me will not be surprised that I want to focus on the second of these factors. My former company, Bay Area Workforce Development Board has been involved in reentry programs since 1998. We started one of the most effective reentry programs, Windows to Work, and I was engaged with many programs and job fairs in state prison facilities.

Eberstadt points out that for the last fifty years, "get tough on crime" initiatives have resulted in increasing numbers of people in our country with felony convictions. His data shows that there may be as many as 20 million "noninstitutionalized adults with a felony conviction" in America, about 13 percent of all American males. Almost all those incarcerated are released at some point while others are sentenced just to community supervision and do not spend time at all inside a facility. But a felony conviction is a significant barrier to employment. Couple that with the lack of programming and training available to these "justice-impacted individuals" and it is easy to understand why many of them might simply give up looking for work and find some other way to get by.

Wisconsin, I am sad to say, is a poster child for this trend. Currently about 21,000 individuals are incarcerated in state prisons in addition to those in county jails, juvenile justice facilities, and immigration detention around the state, perhaps over 40,000 people in all.

Here are some recent numbers from my colleagues at EXPO (Ex-Prisoners Organizing):

- There are almost 23,000 individuals in Wisconsin on extended supervision or parole (punitive restrictions after release from prison);
- There are over 39,000 individuals in Wisconsin on probation (punitive restrictions instead of prison);
- Wisconsin ranks sixth nationally for the longest average parole with 38 months.

In addition, individuals on probation or parole cannot vote, may be searched without a warrant, may be on electronic monitoring (ankle bracelets), and are required to pay thousands in fees and fines. Almost 9% of black adults in Wisconsin are affected by these policies.

Here is some additional data from Wisconsin Department of Corrections:

- About 9,000 individuals are released annually from Wisconsin prisons;
- Males make up about 90% of those released each year;
- Inmates aged 20-39 make up about two-thirds of those released each year;
- Over 80% of those released were on community supervision (i.e. probation), a rate which has increased since the implementation of Truth in Sentencing in 1999;
- The majority of those released have served less than two years in prison.

[Data from "Wisconsin Prison Releases 2000-2018"]

This is talent that we desperately need in our state workforce.

Add to this equation the lack of programming and training currently available in our state prisons. A presentation by Wisconsin Department of Correction officials in August 2022 showed waiting lists in the thousands, some over ten thousand, for basic programs such as anger management, cognitive/behavioral change, technical education, and substance abuse treatment in our state prisons.

We can do better. We must do better.

Success can happen. My friend, Daniel, whom I met years ago at a state prison, shows how someone can succeed despite all the barriers. He came from a violent, dysfunctional home that left him with permanent scars. He acted out at an early age and, as a registered sex offender, served a 21-year sentence. Despite obstacles, Daniel took advantage of everything he could for self-improvement. Upon release eight years ago, he had to go to a small community in which he had no family, friends, or contacts other than his probation officer. He got a job through a staffing agency at a subsidiary of a large Wisconsin company doing manual work. It was a six-mile bicycle ride to work each day. After proving himself, he was hired as a permanent employee doing manual work.

After two years he was promoted to a machine operator position tending a robot. Our Windows to Work program had taught him how to establish a good credit rating and he soon had a beautiful new car. After four years, he has been promoted to a manager position at the facility, complete with a nameplate on his office door (he sent me a photo). There may be bigger things for him ahead with the company. Daniel will be on active community supervision for decades with an ankle bracelet.

I can tell many more success stories.

Eberstadt concludes with this observation:

Imagine how different our country would be if another 9 to 10 million American men—most of them of prime working age—held down paying jobs today. That is the difference between the male work rates America enjoyed in 1965 and those now.

My friend, Joshua Johnson, who did a ten-year sentence is now a national apprenticeship Director at Jobs for the Future after serving as the Wisconsin State Director of the Bureau of Apprenticeship Standards, has started a program called “Pardon Me.” He received an official pardon from Governor Evers last year. Follow him on LinkedIn.

Shannon Ross, founder of a reentry effort called The Community in Milwaukee, has been taking his video “Correcting the Narrative” across the state to highlight success stories of formerly incarcerated individuals.

As we work to address our current and future workforce needs, we have a resource near at hand that can help meet our needs.

- We need to reform our state corrections system to provide more treatment, training, and support to those who have made serious mistakes in their lives;
- Increase preparation and opportunities for work release while incarcerated;
- Make better connections to productive employment need to be available before and during community reintegration;
- Educate employers about the talent such men and women can bring to their companies and how to provide the support they need to succeed.

I hope to write again soon about my experiences in our state prison system and to continue to work with my many friends to address this key workforce issue. Eberstadt’s study has pointed clearly to a resource we can engage to address one of the most important challenges facing our state in the coming decades—finding a supply of skilled workers.