(Re)entry From the Bottom Up: Case Study of a Critical Approach to Assisting Women Coming Home From Prison

By Melissa Burch

Design by Ana Holschuh
Many returning prisoners were not fully integrated members of society prior to their imprisonment.

“You see, my life was already chaos before I started my prison journeys.”
Discussions of successful (re)integration unfold as if it were merely a technical problem to be solved—a feat achievable by the individual who takes all of the appropriate steps.

But the same structures of inequality and disadvantage that inform women’s imprisonment continue to shape their possibilities in (re)entry.
We know we can’t do certain things, that we won’t have certain opportunities. They got us bunched up in these cities, sitting on top of each other with all these problems.

“A young black person doing good? That’s rare. It certainly wasn’t anyone I knew.”

“We know we can’t do certain things, that we won’t have certain opportunities. They got us bunched up in these cities, sitting on top of each other with all these problems.

“The system is designed for us to fail before we’re even born.”
The pressure to “succeed” from parole and probation officers, families and social workers is tremendous.

The obstacles endless and overwhelming.

They get you out, stick you in a drug program and that’s it…

“Ok, so where do I go from here?”
(Re)entry programs often emulate the surveillance practices of prisons and - despite their missions to support - are experienced by participants as extensions of the punishment system.

“They’re thinking, I have this, eat it, and if you don’t want to eat it that means you don’t want nothing. Never mind I can’t chew ‘cause I ain’t got no teeth.”
In the focus on exceptional individuals, we can forget:

**exceptionality should not be required in order to successfully (re)enter.**
Abstract:
Despite decades of critical reframings, policy and practice on prisoner (re)entry often remains situated within a framework of individual responsibility that fails to acknowledge the structural drivers of criminalization. Attending to individual symptoms rather than root social, political and economic causes, such approaches may ultimately reinforce the inequalities and injustices that fuel imprisonment. This article presents a case study of an alternative approach. It examines A New Way of Life Reentry Project, a nonprofit organization in South Los Angeles, California, that offers housing and support to women coming home from prison through a critical and holistic framework—one that attends simultaneously to the physical, mental and social contexts that shape lived experiences before, during and after prison. Drawing from 7 years of observation and participation, supplemented by ten in-depth interviews, I argue that a critical, holistic approach can have a significant positive impact for people returning home from prison.