



# Media

## Finally Giving Serious Attention to Corrections: Prison Professionals Can Help

I can think of plenty of reasons why the media spotlight should shine steadily on corrections. Even if much of the public does not care about prisons or inmates, their impact on communities, public safety and government spending is enormous.

The criminal justice system has reshaped state budgets, urban neighborhoods and popular culture. During the 1980s and 1990s, prison culture became the norm on some blocks, right down to inmate-style baggy, beltless pants. Prison vernacular has found its way onto the streets and into the rhymes of hip-hop. My 32-year-old brother-in-law, who served seven years in prison for drug dealing, once told me that he did not know any young man from his eastside Detroit neighborhood who had not wound up in prison, jail or on probation.

In Michigan, the number of inmates has risen from below 9,000 in the mid-1970s to nearly 50,000 today. The state faces a \$375 million budget shortfall. At a time when the government does not have enough money to pay for roads or schools, the prison budget eats up \$1.8 billion a year, nearly 20 percent of the state's general fund. Michigan spends about as much on prisons as it does on higher education.

During the past 30 years, fueled by tough-on-crime politicians, the nation's

prison population has more than quadrupled to surpass 2 million. State and federal prisons constitute a \$31 billion a year growth industry, a grim reminder of the nation's failure to solve some of its deepest social problems.



By Jeff Gerritt

Here are some more sobering statistics: The United States reports the world's highest incarceration rate. One in 14 black children, or 1.5 million, has a parent in prison. Hundreds of thousands of offenders are released into their communities every year, many of them ill-prepared for life on the outside.

It would be thought that the media would have a fraction of the interest in these issues that they had in, say, Janet Jackson's wardrobe malfunction. Unfortunately, they have not. Only a handful of newspapers in the country have a full-time corrections reporter. The lack of sustained and informed coverage of corrections is appalling.

That is about to change as a wider interest in corrections emerges. A Supreme Court justice has publicly questioned the nation's huge prison population. A conservative Republican president has backed prison reentry programs. In Michigan, local media have started to do in-depth reports on the state's new reentry initiative to better prepare inmates for life after prison. Given the fiscal crises facing most state governments, the media are finally ready to give some serious play to corrections. Corrections professionals can help make sure they get the story right.

### Corrections' Role

Many — if not most — of the journalists covering corrections know little about it. They tend to show up only for breaking news, such as a prison riot or escape. As a reporter, and now as an editorial writer and columnist, I have covered corrections, on and off, for my entire 20-year career. I have spent a lot of that time trying to convince skeptical editors that corrections warrants more serious and sustained coverage.

There are many reasons for the media's weak showing. Conflict and controversy drive most hard news, especially in television. The old maxim, "If it bleeds, it leads," still

applies. Prison riots or homicides fall into that category. But complicated stories about the impact of prison education or vocation programs on recidivism, or efforts to keep incarcerated families together, may not be attractive enough, at least for television. There is a larger issue, too. Most people going to prison are poor, and disproportionate shares of them are poor and black. They are not a priority for policy-makers, the public or the media. Most reporters and editors come from middle-class backgrounds and have had little contact with people who get caught up in the criminal justice system.

I have always found correctional staff extraordinarily willing to help journalists who want to understand the broader issues. I started my career in 1984 at a small newspaper in Oshkosh, Wis. The state was opening a new medium-security prison there. Warden Donald Gudmanson allowed me to spend two weeks inside the prison. I could not sleep there, but I stayed from 8 a.m. to 9 p.m. Without an escort, I roamed the prison at will and talked to any inmate or staff member I wanted. On my last two days, I brought in a photographer, who was also given complete freedom to photograph who or what she wanted, as long as inmates consented. The result was an 18-story series on life inside the walls. That kind of media access to prisons is almost unheard of today — in fact, it was almost unheard of then. But it paid off for Gudmanson. The series was compelling but not sensational. It educated readers. Gudmanson's open-door policy to the media and community was largely responsible for the excellent relations his prison enjoyed. Oshkosh Correctional Institution expanded several times during the 1980s and 1990s — with practically full community support.

Today, I try to frame my columns and editorials on corrections in terms that will most likely interest the average reader. Corrections might want to do the same when framing issues for the media. That means, for the most part, focusing on corrections in terms of public spending and public safety. Reentry programs are a good example. The Michigan Department of Corrections is, wisely, marketing this effort as a way to make communities safer

and reduce costly recidivism rates. On average, it costs \$30,000 a year to incarcerate a person. Michigan releases 12,000 offenders a year on parole, and half of them come back at a cost to taxpayers of \$180 million a year. Programs to reduce recidivism, such as reentry and education, save money in the long run. They also make communities safer because every ex-inmate who commits another crime creates another victim. Even so, some of these programs will continue to be controversial. Crime and punishment are emotional issues. A lot of television news is crime related. So many people feel less safe today, even as violent crime has dropped in most areas of the country.

Prisons are also great places to find human-interest stories. I have done a lot of them over the years, including features on women having babies in prisons, prison artists and artwork, inmates making Christmas toys, and inmates building low-income housing as part of a restorative justice program. Correctional administrators should continue to pitch these kinds of stories and cooperate with reporters who want to do them. But do not always expect a huge response. It takes a special kind of reporter to see the humanity of people in prison and tell the story well.

The challenges for covering corrections are immense. Corrections can help by providing as much information and access as possible. For example, the Michigan Department of Corrections has done an excellent job of providing information to reporters, editorial writers and columnists. Its public information team of Leo Lalonde and Russ Marlan is the best I have worked with in state government. Other staff members, including director Patricia Caruso and deputy director Dennis Schrantz, have been generous with their time in explaining issues and positions. That has helped me, when writing editorials and columns for the state's largest newspaper, make the case for supporting many of their positions. The *Detroit Free Press* editorial page has sided with the department, for example, in pushing reentry initiatives and fighting shortsighted efforts by legislators to cut prison education programs. The newspaper has also, at times, respectfully disagreed with the

department. To name one, we consider its inmate visitation policies too restrictive.

## Media Hurdles

The *Detroit Free Press* has also been critical of the department's policy to generally ban cameras and recording equipment inside prisons, though the policy has a bigger impact on television than on the print media. Giving reporters and cameras access to prisons and inmates is an essential part of keeping prisons accountable. It lets the public who pay for the prisons — and the salaries of everyone who works there — know what is going on inside. Nationwide, cameras in prison have led to some sensational reporting, yes, but they have also captured, in the powerful way only visual images can, some ugly abuses that had to be exposed.

A ban on cameras and recorders has the practical effect of keeping out the electronic media, especially television. True, journalists are still free to talk to inmates with a pad and pen, but television stories need visuals to work. If television reporters cannot get them, they often will not bother doing the story. Even newspaper stories are greatly enhanced by photographs, especially today. The stories I did in Wisconsin about prison life would have gotten far fewer readers if good photos had not accompanied them. The Michigan Department of Corrections understands the value of photographs because department officials have made exceptions for me and other journalists on certain stories.

Michigan corrections officials argue that cameras make inmates media stars, and that they are disruptive and a security risk. To be sure, reporters and cameras inside a prison can be a headache. But that is not a good enough reason to ban them. Inmate visitation, which is so important for rehabilitation and maintaining family ties, is also a headache for staff, but that does not mean it should end.

I covered prisons for 10 years in Wisconsin. I know of no case in which security was compromised because cameras were allowed in. Truth be told, I think the issue is more one of controlling coverage. Michigan's policy before 2000 gave journalists and their

cameras access. It created no real security problems, but it did create some bad publicity, including a Geraldo Rivera special on prison conditions for women in Michigan, and critical reports from Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International.

No doubt, a warden is responsible for an institution's security, and for the safety of staff, inmates and visitors. Camera crews and reporters should not walk around at will. And wardens should have the right, on a case-by-case basis, to bar cameras or on-camera inmate interviews, if they believe such access would pose a real risk. But those cases should be the exceptions, not the general rule. The benefits of running a more open system outweigh the costs, especially as U.S. prisons become more crowded. There is more idle time, fewer opportunities for inmates to rehabilitate themselves and more tension. Prison health care has gotten worse, and state legislatures are looking to cut already inadequate prison education budgets. Information about prisons is more vital than ever.

## Be Open and Accessible

Even with more educated reporters, corrections professionals will not like every story they read. In fact, I would worry if they did. Prison officials and the media have different jobs. As government employees, correctional staff's job generally should not be to tell the media what they should report. When a correctional officer abuses an inmate, it is legitimate news, even though it unfairly reflects on a general-

ly dedicated and professional staff. (I know firsthand that the typical correctional officer is the exact opposite of the media and movie stereotype.) But it happens to people in all professions, including mine. When unethical reporters like Jayson Blair of *The Washington Post* or Jack Kelly of *USA Today* fabricate stories, it unfairly taints all journalists. But that does not mean the media should not have reported the scandals.

I also cannot guarantee that there will not be run-ins with a few irresponsible journalists who will not get the story right because they had the story finished before they started. Caruso recently told me about a local television reporter she worked with as a warden, back when Michigan policy still allowed cameras on inmates. The reporter came in under the guise of doing a story on prison education programs. What she really wanted was a few video shots of inmates doing things like playing chess in their cell, so that she could run a multipart series titled "Pampered Prisoners." It was inaccurate and irresponsible. Caruso was furious, and I do not blame her. I can only say that reporters like that are the exceptions.

In the long run, dealing with the media in the most open and accessible way possible is the best way to make sure they get the story right. As journalists finally give some serious attention to corrections, it is more important than ever that they do.

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