

ROAD TO RETURN

DISCUSSION GUIDE

INTRODUCTION

Project Return is a successful Louisiana program that helps formerly incarcerated men and women return to their families and communities to become productive citizens.

Road to Return, a one-hour film, not only documents this effective project, but also challenges viewers to think about whether the government's current focus on prisons and punishment actually increases, rather than decreases crime. It takes a poignant look at the reality of life after incarceration, delving into the prison conditions that affect the mind-set of newly released individuals and their ability to succeed on the "outside."



The film and this companion guide are intended to assist groups to explore the techniques used by Project Return and why they work, to compare those techniques to the practices more common in prisons and jails across the United States today, and ultimately, to draw conclusions about how organizations and individuals might help to address

the challenges related to incarceration and reentry facing their own communities.

The film features:

Dr. Robert (Bob) Roberts, professor at Tulane University and Co-Founder of Project Return;

Nelson Marks, a former prisoner who served twelve years for bank robbery and Co-Founder of Project Return;

John Densmore, drummer from The Doors, who has introduced drumming to Project Return as a method of community building;

Sister Helen Prejean, activist and author of the bestselling anti-death penalty memoir *Dead Man Walking*;

and **Project Return participants**.

TOPICS

- **Reintegration** –What do individuals who were formerly incarcerated need to make the transition to become a contributing member of society and how can you or your group help? How can penal institutions better prepare soon-to-be-released prisoners for the world outside?
- **Punishment versus Rehabilitation** – What do we want from our justice system and are current practices really meeting our goals? What are the differences between a

system focused on punishment and a system focused on rehabilitation, and which better addresses concerns about crime?

- **Racial and Economic Disparities** – What are the links between poverty, racism, and the demographic make up of the current prison population? How might people address racism and economic need in ways that would prevent crime?
- **Prevention** – Recognizing the links between crime and substance abuse, lack of education, and poverty, what might we do to prevent people from being incarcerated in the first place?

SUGGESTED AUDIENCES FOR *ROAD TO RETURN*

Faith Community:

- outreach, prison, youth, women's, or music ministries
- sermon topics, community forums, and discussion groups
- mentoring programs
- substance abuse and recovery ministries
- religious education classes

Business Community:

- human resources workshops
- funding strategy sessions, workshops with philanthropies
- job fairs
- apprenticeship and mentoring programs

Civic Groups

- community forums
- mentoring programs
- youth programs
- substance abuse prevention and recovery programs
- domestic violence intervention programs

Law Enforcement / Criminal Justice:

- workshops for correctional officers, police officers, lawyers, judges, social workers, social service providers, juvenile justice counselors, and educators
- workshops for policymakers, city council members, and state officials

Educational Institutions:

- college student groups and departments of criminal justice, psychology, public health, sociology, social work, peace studies, gender studies, African-American studies, and Latino studies

BACKGROUND

Statistics

According to *Road to Return*,

- Currently, 7 million people are locked up in the U.S.
- 90% of those currently incarcerated will be released.
- Of those who are released without help from interventions like Project Return, 75% will commit another crime and be incarcerated again.
- 65% of current inmates are incarcerated for non-violent offenses.
- 92% of convicted felons are high school dropouts.
- 85% of convicted felons are addicted to drugs or alcohol.
- One in three 20-29 year-old African-American men are currently under justice system supervision.
- The U.S. is currently spending \$8 billion for the construction of new prisons.

Project Return

New Orleans-based Project Return was founded in 1994 at Tulane University to help individuals who were formerly incarcerated break the cycle of crime and imprisonment by building on their existing survival skills to become self reliant, law abiding citizens. Created by Dr. Robert (Bob) Roberts and former inmate Nelson Marks, Project Return offers a 90-day program of group therapy, job training, and job placement designed to help those leaving confinement find success outside prison walls.

Participants in Project Return spend almost 40 hours a week in classes to obtain their General Equivalency Degrees, learn how to resolve conflicts, and receive job training and placement assistance. Because nearly a third of the original participants were illiterate, Project Return also includes a basic math and English curriculum.

Also central to Project Return are community building workshops in which participants gather together to work on a single goal of becoming a community. These meetings help participants cope with stress and anger as well as develop communication and interpersonal skills.

*He who opens a
school door, closes
a prison.*
-- Victor Hugo

The program also emphasizes addiction treatment and counseling. Project Return operates under the assumption that addictions affect the majority of offenders, but that few receive proper treatment. Participants with drug or alcohol addictions are required to receive treatment.

Lastly, Project Return helps its participants find and maintain employment. Individuals formerly convicted of a felony have the highest risk for unemployment in New Orleans. Two thirds of Project Return graduates since 1994 are employed.

The cost of Project Return is about \$4,000 per individual, much less than the \$100,000 cost to rearrest, arraign, detain, and sentence a repeat offender. Only 5.3% of Project Return participants committed repeat offenses within six months of release from jail. That compares to an 88% national recidivism average and a Louisiana rate of 37.5 percent within the first six months of release from prison and 75 percent after that. In an initial study of 726 Project Return participants, only 37 have been convicted of a second offense.

Project Return is based on the belief that giving people a sense of dignity, purpose, and connection is more likely to keep them from committing crimes than making them feel angry, frustrated, and helpless. The Project is committed to rehabilitation rather than the punishment-based system currently at the core of most U.S. prisons.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Nelson Marks observes of the U.S., “We want punishment. We don’t want rehabilitation.” What do you think he meant? Do you agree? Do you think a system focused on punishment is a good thing? Is it effective? Are there alternatives or adaptations that might be more effective?
- The film presents contrasting theories about how people can change. What ideas did you hear? Which ones seem most convincing to you and why?
- When you think of a “former prisoner,” what comes to mind? What expectations do you have of an individual with that label? Where do those expectations come from? As you watch the film, what kinds of expectations do you think the Project Return participants have of themselves? Do they confirm or contradict the image you had prior to viewing the film?
- Share your reactions to the statistics listed in the Background Section. Do they confirm or contradict what you thought you knew about inmates and the penal system before you viewed the film? What do they suggest about who is and isn’t benefiting from current policy?
- Share your reactions to these quotes from *Road to Return*:
 - Prisons are “factories for repeat offenders.”
 - “The criminal justice system creates more crime than it prevents.”
 - “We do too much social work and not enough moral work.”

- One of the people we meet in *Road to Return* is 21 year-old Davidson Lewis. We see him as he is released from prison with no high school diploma, a criminal record that will make it difficult to find a job, no marketable skills, a history of drug use for which he received no treatment while in prison, a mounting debt of \$43 per month for supervision fees, a check for \$10 which he cannot cash without legal identification which he does not have, and some clothing. If you could add things to Lewis' departure kit that would increase his chances for success, what would you add? How does Lewis' experience compare to inmates released from the jails or prisons serving your community?

- Bob Roberts recounts heart-wrenching stories about Project Return having to turn away participants for lack of funds. Why do you think the Project is not fully funded, despite its proven success at reducing recidivism? Why do you think there might be resistance to adopting Project Return or similar programs as standard practice?

- The film notes that people of color and poor people are significantly overrepresented in U.S. prisons. What kinds of racial or economic justice programs exist in your community? Does the work they do help address crime prevention or the needs of individuals who were formerly incarcerated? If so, how? If not, how might you work with them to add the needs of current, former, and prospective prisoners to their agendas?

- A key facet of Project Return's community-building approach is providing former prisoners with an opportunity to voice their experiences and feelings. In your opinion, why is this opportunity important for this population?

- The link between abuse and crime is well established, and several of the Project Return participants link their criminal behavior to experiences that caused them deep and lasting pain and anger. Given this reality, what is the likely impact of subjecting inmates to additional abuse, humiliation, or frustration?

- What do we mean when we say, "Let's get tough on crime"? What do we hope will happen and are our current practices helping us make those hopes a reality? What are we afraid of and where does our fear come from? How do your beliefs about the frequency of crime compare with the actual statistics for crime in your community?

- Most current prison policy is based on the notion that subjecting individuals to a negative experience will serve as a deterrent, both to others and to those thinking of committing crimes after their release. Yet, statistics indicate that recidivism rates of those who do not participate in positive intervention programs like Project Return is 88%. If the punishment-as-deterrence model

is not working, why do we continue to use it? Who is benefiting from this model? Who is hurt by it?

- How might the sentiment behind “No Child Left Behind” be applied to people who are incarcerated? How do we make sure that every person sees alternatives and that crime is not the only way out of poverty?

ACTIVITY SUGGESTIONS

- Based on what you see in the film, make a list of the things that a former inmate needs to succeed in your community (e.g., counseling, a sense of community, help with parenting/parenting skills training, job training, education, employment, substance abuse recovery programs, medical care, affordable housing, clothing, and transportation). Use that list to conduct a community assessment. In your community, who is providing these services? Brainstorm ways to fill any gaps you find.
- Use *Road to Return* as the basis for a “starfish” retreat, based on the story that Roberts tells towards the end of the film about the boy who knows he can’t save all the starfish that have washed up on the beach, but who says of the one he threw back in the water, “I made a difference to that one.” Retreat participants can study the circumstances and needs of individuals who were formerly incarcerated returning to society. End the retreat by committing to at least one action that will aid people who are reentering your community.
- As you watch the film, make a list of the kinds of things that Project Return defines as essential to rehabilitation (e.g., education, respect, freedom from addiction). Look at the jail or prison closest to where you live. Which of the effective elements from Project Return are present in your community’s institution(s)? How might you work with the people who run your penal institutions to introduce some of those elements?

The world is a dangerous place to live, not because of the people who are evil, but because of the people who don't do anything about it.

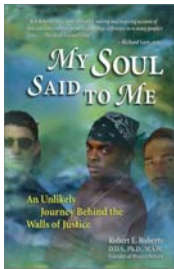
-- Albert Einstein

- Provide a forum for former prisoners and their families to share their experiences and help craft solutions.
- As a prevention tool, offer workshops on self-esteem, substance abuse prevention, coping with stress, family violence, and/or ethnic pride, to the general public.
- Provide key community leaders and officials in your community with copies of *Road to Return* and or Bob Roberts book, *My Soul Said to Me*.
- Identify and convene community stakeholders to coordinate efforts, both volunteer and professional, to support former prisoners as they try to create a

successful life back in the community. In addition to typical social service and faith-based entities, invite groups such as *Suited For Success*, which provides donated business attire to enable low-income women to dress appropriately for successful transition to the workplace.

- Arrange to have Nelson Marks or a similar activist speak to your school or community youth organization about how to avoid behaviors that might lead to a future in prison.
- Try including drumming in your next event. Talk about how it made people feel. How might drumming help bring people together and why might it be important to have a way to come together that does not involve speaking?

SUGGESTED RESOURCES FOR ROAD TO RETURN



Peck, M. Scott (2003). *The Road Less Traveled* (New York: Touchstone, 25th Edition, orig. 1978) – The book that inspired Bob Roberts to create Project Return.

Roberts, Robert E.. *My Soul Said to Me.* (Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, Inc., 2003) – Chronicles Bob Roberts' journey from a lucrative dental practice to a rehabilitation program in a rural Louisiana prison to his revolutionary reentry program.

Outside the Walls: A National Snapshot of Community-Based Prisoner Reentry Programs. Resource Guide. By Amy L. Solomon, Michelle Waul, Asheley Van Ness, and Jeremy Travis, Urban Institute. In collaboration with Outreach Extensions. September 2003.

Outside the Walls: A National Snapshot of Community-Based Prisoner Reentry Programs. Videotape. Produced by D.R. Lynes, Inc. in collaboration with the Urban Institute, Council of State Governments, The Annie E. Casey Foundation, and Outreach Extensions. September 2003.

Web sites

www.roadtoreturn.com/ - The Web site for the film contains additional background information.

www.metrocrimeno.org/PR_report.pdf – A research report on the efficacy of Project Return

www.suitedforsuccess.org - One of several organizations that help low-income women find appropriate clothing and training for job interviews.

<http://prisonministry.net> - A comprehensive listing and links to Christian prison ministries.

www.Amnesty.org - Contains information on prison issues and human rights.

<http://www.in.gov/indcorrection/links/links.html> - Links to every state department of correction.

<http://www.sentencingproject.org> - The Sentencing Project is a nonprofit organization that promotes reduced reliance on incarceration and increased use of more effective and humane alternatives to deal with crime. It is a nationally recognized source of criminal justice policy analysis, data, and program information, much of which is downloadable from this site.

<http://www.jpp.org> - The Journal of Prisoners on Prisons brings prisoners' voices into academic and political discussions of prison policy.

<http://www.prisonactivist.org> - The Prison Activist Resource Center is a self-defined radical group that organizes against the Military Industrial Complex.

<http://www.prisonlegalnews.org/links/links.htm> - The Prison Legal News is a monthly magazine. Its Resource Links Page includes state-by-state directories of prisons, prisoners, books to prisoners programs, and more.

<http://prisonpolicy.org> - The Prison Policy Initiative is a research and advocacy organization.

<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/welcome.html> - The United States Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics is a good source for official government data.

The *Road to Return* Discussion Guide was originally developed by Anita Brashears with additional content by Dr. Faith Rogow. The guide was developed in collaboration with Outreach Extensions.



Road to Return is one of a series of public television films showcased in the **Reentry National Media Outreach Campaign**. All productions incorporate the theme of reentry into family and community. These and other programs are elements of the Making Connections Media Outreach Initiative (MCMOI), an outreach project supported by The Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF). Launched in February 2001, MCMOI links public television stations to local stakeholders as a means to promote the Foundation's Core Results for strong and connected neighborhoods for children and families. Please visit the MCMOI Web site at:

www.aecf.org/initiatives/mc/communications/mcmoi/

The Reentry National Media Outreach Campaign and other MCMOI campaigns are managed by Outreach Extensions, a national consulting firm that specializes in comprehensive, high-profile educational and community outreach campaigns for media projects.

Visit the Reentry Web site at: www.reentrymediaoutreach.org.

For more information on the Reentry National Media Outreach Campaign, please contact:



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