

My Greatest Fear

Jason Daugherty

Huttonsville Correctional Center

Huttonsville, WV

One of my greatest fears in life is becoming a statistic. There are currently an estimated seven million people in some form of correctional custody in the United States. Of those, two million and three hundred thousand are in jail or prison (Ross and Richards xi). Unfortunately, I am already counted among those over two million souls already in jail or prison. It is another, far more disturbing, statistic that worries me. Each year, six hundred and fifty thousand ex-offenders are sent back out into society. Of those, two-thirds will return within three years (Krannich 2). This is the alarming reality that haunts my dreams of freedom. I cannot allow myself to become a part of that statistic.

One of the biggest problems faced by most ex-offenders who are trying to successfully reenter society is finding a suitable place to live. Most inmates lose a significant portion of their material possessions during their incarceration. Some lose everything. I am one who has no place to go that will not lead to problems. The few opportunities available to me will all come with great pressure to relapse into the drug and crime fueled lifestyle that led me to prison in the first place. While other options do exist, such as halfway houses or rehab clinics, it is not easy to get into such places. It often requires extensive paperwork, long waiting lists, and the help of institutional staff, which is not always easy to get.

Another problem that must be faced by most ex-offenders trying to reenter society is finding suitable and reliable transportation. For some, finding an affordable vehicle is the easy part. The hard part often comes when trying to get the vehicle road legal, and in trying to get a valid driver's license. It can often cost thousands of dollars in fines and court fees before ex-felons can legally drive again. Once more, there are other options, but they too have problems and limitations. A taxi can be expensive over a period of time, and a bus will only get you close to your destination.

The obvious solution to both of these problems would be to find a job, as this would provide the income necessary to acquire a home and vehicle. This is not as easy as it may seem, even in a healthy economy. Without a home, it is hard to list an address or phone number on a job application. Without transportation, it will be hard to get anywhere to complete a job application, to say nothing of the daily commute to and from work. Then there's the stigma attached to ex-felons. Few employers will hire a convicted felon for any type of meaningful work. The fear of theft or violence is an all too real threat in the workplace. Many employers fear that adding a felon to the mix would only add fuel to an already raging inferno.

The lack of home, transportation, or employment leads all too many people to relapse back into the drug habits or criminal lifestyle that most criminals have become accustomed to. The trials and tribulations of trying to live right will cause many addicts to justify that first hit, just to relieve some stress. The pressure to pay bills and provide for their families will cause some to turn to criminal activity to get the money they need to meet their financial goals. I've heard many ex-felons say that they will "hustle" just long enough to get the money they need, and then they'll quit. The problem is, many never reach that goal. They are arrested long before they can get the money they intended to save. The ones who do reach their initial goal almost always continue in their criminal ways, stopping only once they've been arrested and joined the two-thirds who return to prison in the first three years.

Despite the obstacles, many ex-felons have found success after prison. Nelson Mandela spent nearly twenty years in a South African prison before going on to become the country's first black president (Jackson 62). Michael B. Jackson was in and out of prison for ten years before becoming a successful author, motivational speaker, and businessman (Jackson 9). Stephen C. Richards spent nine years in federal prison for conspiracy to distribute marijuana, and

is now a Professor of Criminal Justice at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh (Ross and Richards back cover).

Though I know it won't be easy, I hope to follow in the footsteps of those who have found success after prison. I am taking proactive steps now to prepare me for the obstacles that I know await me on the outside. I have begun an extensive substance abuse program to prepare me for the temptations that I will face on a daily basis once I'm released. I have also begun working towards a college degree to better my chances of finding gainful employment. I realize that these steps will not guarantee me success upon reentering society, but they will greatly improve my chances of having a successful life after prison. Upon my release, I will work hard to avoid the dangers and overcome the obstacles that I know will be waiting for me so that I do not become a recidivism statistic.

Works Cited

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