

Osborne Today

A report from the Osborne Association
Fall 2008

The Meaning of Life – and Very, Very Long - Sentences

The United States still leads the world in incarceration. But in New York State, the crime rate and prison population have been falling, and the key driver of our still high prison population is now *length of stay*, particularly for those serving sentences for violent crimes. Sentences for homicide, typically “life” sentences requiring at least 15 years in prison before parole can be considered, are much longer than sentences imposed by virtually every other Western democracy for similar crimes. In the US, New York leads all 50 states in the proportion of people serving life sentences.

New York’s Parole Board often holds people for years or even decades beyond the time required by their sentences. This may happen even when everyone agrees that the person has accepted responsibility for the crime, expressed true remorse, become rehabilitated, and poses no threat to public safety.

In fact, people serving life sentences for murder are, statistically, very unlikely to pose a threat to public safety were they to be released when they became eligible for parole. According to Commissioner Denise O’Donnell of the NYS Division of Criminal Justice Services, testifying at a State Senate hearing in January:



Should they languish forever?

“Of the 368 inmates convicted of murder who were released between 1999 and 2003, only 1.6%—six people—were returned for a new felony within three years...**Contrary to popular perception, our experience in New York is that [those] convicted of the most serious crimes—murder—are the least like to commit a felony once they are paroled.**”

Still, Parole Boards in New York and other states routinely and repeatedly deny parole to individuals who have completed the term required by law, in effect “re-sentencing” them to more time in prison than the judge intended at the time of sentencing. Parole Boards typically base these parole denials on the “serious nature and circumstances of the instant offense,” which may have occurred 15, 25, 35, or more years ago, and which can never change regardless of how long people stay in prison or how much they transform their lives. Parole Boards are normally expected to consider a number of factors such as good behavior, education, work, training, insight, and relationships—things that in **continued on page 3**



What I Know Now

Christine Ceravolo completed 16 years in prison for murder. She was 16 years old when she went to prison. With assistance from the Longtermers Project, she was released on parole after her first appearance before the New York State Parole Board.

My name is Christine. I come from a dysfunctional family. My mother was a drug addict. She still is, even though she denies it. She doesn’t function. She just collects disability. My father was an abusive drunk. He broke my nose when I was four years old. When I was young, I was removed from my home a couple of times. They [Child Protective Services] put me in a homeless shelter. I was a rebellious teenager and made trouble. So they gave me a bus ticket to Job Corps. It was like they were saying, “We don’t know what else to do with you.” I felt like I was being thrown away.

Later, after I committed my crime, I was sent to Bedford Correctional Facility, an adult prison. I was 16 at the time. There were only ten other adolescents, and they didn’t know what to do with us. Again I felt like we were being thrown away: “You’re in prison, just do your time.” I continued to rebel and make trouble for the first eight years. But eventually I got tired of it, and I thought to myself, “This is not the

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Letter from Executive Director Elizabeth Gaynes



Our advocacy work recognizes this: Individual responsibility for individual behavior is fine as far as it goes, but it doesn't go far enough.

To Advocate = To Give Voice To

The Osborne Association is best known for offering direct services—education, job placement, counseling, treatment, and family support—to people affected by incarceration. We endeavor to address the basic needs that all people have—to live and feel safe, to love and be loved, to belong to and provide for their families and communities.

But to do this, we need to go beyond direct services, to challenge the policies, practices, public attitudes and systemic barriers that stand in the way of our promise to transform individuals, families, communities and the criminal justice system.

Our advocacy is:

- strongly rooted in our experience;
- squarely aligned with our mission to reduce crime and its human and economic costs; and
- strategically focused on those consequences of mass incarceration least addressed by the larger criminal justice field.

It's not that we don't support front-end alternatives to incarceration, drug policy reform, reducing employment barriers, increasing access to treatment, addressing structural racism, and expanding opportunity for people who are currently and formerly incarcerated. We do! Every one of these is vital to the success of our clients. But we have chosen to primarily commit our resources to three areas:

- Reducing reliance on incarceration, by decreasing the length of prison terms, and improving parole policies, particularly for people serving long sentences for violent crimes (see lead article);
- Meeting the needs and respecting the rights of children whose parents are involved in the criminal justice system (see centerfold article); and
- Closing underutilized, unsafe, and inaccessible jails, youth facilities and prisons, and for individuals for whom no alternative to incarceration is available, confining them in the communities where their families live and to which they will return.

These issues—more than others—have surfaced from Osborne's decades of working inside prisons and jails, building programs and relationships with those who live in them, work in them, and visit them. Our programs emphasize the importance of responsibility. This means incarcerated individuals taking responsibility for the choices they made in the past, and it means incarcerated parents taking responsibility for the impact of those choices on their children.

We teach people in prison how to take responsibility for parenting. Topics range from human growth and development to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, to brain architecture, to the impact of exposure to violence and substance abuse on children, to the important differences between punishment and discipline. Unfortunately, America's prison system was founded on punishment and shows no responsibility or discipline as it continues to expand its reach. Worse, it does not appear to even recognize human growth and development, let alone redemption. Even when parents in prison have done everything asked of them, have accepted responsibility for their crime, and have clearly changed and transformed their lives, they continue to be punished, and their children are punished right alongside them.

Our advocacy work recognizes this: Individual responsibility for individual behavior is fine as far as it goes, but it doesn't go far enough. It neither explains nor justifies the harm that prisons do. When Barack Obama accepted his party's nomination in August, he argued that "fathers must take more responsibility for providing the love and guidance their children need." At the same time, he recognized that "we must provide more ladders to succeed for young men who fall into lives of crime and despair."

His conclusion: "Individual responsibility and mutual responsibility—that's the essence of America's promise."

Our conclusion: **Spot on!** ■

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fact the incarcerated individual has the power to change—but the Parole Board's view of the crime generally trumps all else. Yet especially in homicide cases, the nature of the crime, the prior criminal record, and the impact on the victim's family were all fully considered when the court originally imposed sentence. So unless the Parole Board gives real weight to factors that come into play after sentencing, prison becomes nothing more than perpetual punishment.

With a change of leadership in New York in 2007, parole commissioners were instructed to follow the law and fully consider all factors, including behavior in prison and resources available upon release. Yet, getting to this approach in practice has been slow, given the extent to which parole decisions, especially in high profile cases, are publicized and politicized. When it appeared that



New York's Parole Board was following the law and releasing more longtermers, the State Senate introduced legislation making it more difficult for longtermers to make parole and encouraging the Parole Board to further restrict release.

When we repeatedly deny parole to individuals who have met the legal requirements for parole, we are succumbing to a desire for vengeance, and ignoring the long-term benefit of returning people to their families and communities, where they can make amends, pay taxes, and contribute to their families. Osborne has been part of a growing movement to reform parole practices that, failing to recognize the possibility of transformation, are misaligned with the democratic and spiritual values of our society—mercy, atonement, and redemption.

Working with a group of academics, activists, and advocates, including those who have been paroled following life sentences, Osborne participated in developing and advocating recommendations for reform of parole guidelines and practices. Supported by generous grants from the Open Society Institute, we recently implemented a Longtermers Project that links the policy work to individual **continued on page 6**

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way for me. I need to do something with myself."

I had always believed education was important, so I started college. But then (Governor) Pataki took the funding away. I felt I was trying to do something good, but the governor didn't even want me to do that. Later, they re-started the college program, so I got involved again. It took me ten years, but I completed the program and got a college degree, which felt good.

As I got older, I learned that it's important to take responsibility. I was incarcerated with people who never came to terms with anything they had done. You can be stagnant and keep blaming everybody else, or you can take responsibility for your actions and for your life. I decided, my parents are messed up, but I don't have to be messed up.

In 1997 Sofia's [the victim] mother wrote to me and asked me what had happened. Sometimes you don't know what to say when you've committed a crime. There's no real sorry for that. Sorry is like, "Oh, I'm sorry." It's just the easy way out. Showing and doing things means more. I was still a kid then, but I apologized the best way I knew how at the time, at that age. Over time, there was a progression in the letters we sent back and forth. I told her, I do a lot of things to try to make up for what I did. But I can't. I always do things to be a better person and help somebody else, even though I can't take my crime away.

I was lucky Sofia's mother wrote to me because she didn't have to. She could have been like, "I hate this woman for the rest of my life." She could have kept me in prison for the rest of my life. I feel like the fact that she forgave me was like, oh my God, how do you forgive somebody for that? For me it was spiritual. Words can't explain something like that.

There's a lot about Sophia's mother I don't even know. I don't know how old she is. We never really discussed things like that. I didn't like to intrude on her. We came to terms with what happened, but we're not best friends. There are boundaries there. I used to give her updates on what I was doing so that she could see I wasn't a monster. I didn't want her to think that I was this lunatic that just decided one day to shoot her daughter. She understood that, which is what I wanted. I wanted her to know that I am doing things on behalf of her [Sofia]. I helped start the Youth Assistance Program at Bedford. We'd talk to kids about our experiences, to show them there's a better way.

The Longtermers Project helped me a lot. Through my mentor, Sally, I saw that I'm not 16 years old anymore. I'm 32. I'm an adult, and I've changed. As part of my work with the project, I met with the mother of a murdered daughter. That was tough, because the mother is in a lot of pain and is bitter because the person who murdered her daughter is not sorry and doesn't take responsibility. We talked a long time and I think we came to an understanding of each other.

When I met with the Parole Board, I had to go twice because the first time one person was sick. One voted for me to be released, the other didn't. When I went back, the one who voted against my release was there again. This time I said everything that I felt and all that I had learned in prison. I kept saying, "What I know now"—I probably said that a hundred times. The man was trying to ignore me, he was looking at papers instead of at me. I just sat there and stared at him until he looked up and looked me in the eyes. I wanted him to understand that I meant everything I said. I wanted him to see that I am a human being.

Christine now works in retail. In the two-week probationary period of her job, she brought in \$9,000 in sales. After two months, she was promoted to manager. Christine remains involved in the Longtermers Project by participating in evaluation and helping to select new participants.

When Crayons are Revolutionary

The arrest of a parent can traumatize a child, whether the child is home when the parent is handcuffed and taken away, or comes home to find the parent gone. Sometimes police officers don't ask whether a person being arrested is responsible for children, and children can be abandoned. When children visit their parent in a correctional facility, they are again overwhelmed.



The long trip, sometimes 100 miles or more, leads to a bleak place. Even the parent—missing at home, now dressed in strange clothing—can be frightening to a child. While some question whether children should be taken to prison, **the children will tell you that the only thing worse than visiting a parent in prison is not seeing your parent at all.**

A new report from the US Bureau of Justice Statistics confirms that arrest and incarceration of adults affects millions of children. Nearly half of men and nearly 2/3 of women in federal and state prisons are parents to 1.7 million children. Despite the many ways in which criminal justice policy assumes that people who commit crimes are islands unconnected to other sentient beings, in fact the majority of those parents were living with and/or providing financial support to those children prior to incarceration. These numbers do not include people who are arrested but not incarcerated or the millions who cycle in and out of local jails like Rikers Island.

When Osborne launched the NY Initiative for Children of Incarcerated Parents in 2006, few people in the criminal justice system had given much thought to how their work affected these children. Now, many of these agencies are



participating as partners in the Initiative, reviewing their policies and practices, looking at new possibilities for meeting the needs and respecting the rights of children of

incarcerated parents, and changing the way systems interact with families. For example, many correctional officers, trained in security, have never thought about what visitor processing is like for families and children. In February, at the invitation of Department of Correction (DOC) Commissioner Martin Horn and Deputy Commissioner Kathleen Coughlin, we provided an introductory sensitivity training to correctional staff at Rikers Island, the world's largest jail facility. We offered corrections officers the chance to see how their actions shape the experience of children on visits, and how children perceive people in uniform.

Through this and other advocacy efforts, DOC has made many family-friendly improvements at Rikers. They supported Osborne in offering special Family Days at the men's sentenced facility and have installed diaper-changing stations in the restrooms there. They distribute Osborne's coloring books and crayons to children visiting fathers at this jail facility and have hung child-friendly posters in visiting and

waiting rooms, creating a warmer environment. Now the women's jail has asked for coloring books, and DOC is considering a child-friendly visiting space there as well.

Crayons and posters are not revolutionary in themselves but in what they signify: that through the Initiative's efforts, people in corrections systems are starting to actually see children and families, to take them into account, to change their practices and their environments to make things better for them, and to understand what we've understood for a long time—that

when parents are incarcerated, children and families also do the time.



Attention to children and families is growing at the state level as well. The NYS Department of Correctional Services (DOCS) has expanded its commitment to Osborne's FamilyWorks program, the first comprehensive parenting program for men in a state prison. The program is being taken into additional maximum security men's prisons, providing improved visiting for children in new Family Centers and offering courses in parenting and healthy relationships for their incarcerated fathers. DOCS has also embraced the expansion of the acclaimed Family Reunion Program to Albion, New York's largest prison for women.

The Initiative could not possibly be more important right now. At a time when social service systems are stretched and

budgets strained, policy makers are coming to realize that the Initiative's proposals have the potential to reduce recidivism (**since family ties improve outcomes**), to improve the lives of children (**since they do better when cared for and supported**), and thereby to save state and local governments significant dollars in child and social welfare costs. Unfortunately, New York's budget woes are putting pressure on prisons and jails to eliminate programs for families. The Initiative will advocate strongly that children and their caregivers not be thrown overboard during this storm.

In the coming year, we plan to continue helping corrections agencies to take children and families seriously. We will continue working to reduce trauma for children and ensure

they are well-cared for at the time of a parent's arrest as well as to create more supportive school and after-school environments. Such changes make a huge difference in children's lives. They also help to bring about a crucial shift in thinking—one in which we see and embrace people who are mothers, daughters, fathers and sons just like us—on both sides of the bars. ■



Bob Dennison, New Osborne Board Member



Bob Dennison, one of Osborne's newest Board members, recently retired from a 38-year career with New York State parole and corrections agencies, serving as classification

analyst, revocation specialist, senior corrections counselor, senior parole officer, deputy regional director, parole board commissioner, and chairman of the New York State Parole Board.

Bob has now embarked upon a new mission. He advocates for greater flexibility and fairness in the parole system, along with individuals who have been successful following release from long prison sentences.

"The parole system was designed to be a releasing mechanism," Bob notes. Within the limits of safety, its purpose is to release individuals who have served their minimum sentence, have maintained good behavior, and have demonstrated remorse and rehabilitation.

Unfortunately, amidst the high profile of parole decisions, Parole Board members have tended to focus on the original offense, setting aside other factors. Bob believes Parole Board members should also consider behavior, education, treatment, training, relationships, remorse, and community support.

When parole is denied across-the-board, it undermines incentive for people to strive for release. "For those," Bob says, "who have done everything they could do to show readiness for parole, and have then been denied, the *two year* wait for the next chance at parole can seem longer than the first *twenty years* served." So Bob goes to prisons and speaks with people serving long terms. He tells them of the efforts he and others are making and encourages them not to give up hope.

Bob has reached out to scores of legislators and policymakers, advocating reform. He has created opportunities for formerly incarcerated men and women, including Osborne staff, to tell their stories of transformation while in prison and of success following long-term incarceration. In July, these efforts led to a significant change in

the law governing parole. Previously, under a law passed during the Pataki administration, individuals released on parole while serving a life sentence were required to remain under parole supervision forever. Now they may be released from parole supervision upon the discretion of the Parole Board. Overwhelming majorities of both the Democratic State Assembly and the Republican State Senate recognized that, as a matter of fairness, the same parole rules should be applied that were in place at the time these individuals were sentenced. Governor Paterson signed this bill into law, offering many who have been successful on parole the opportunity for a normal life.

Bob brings decades of experience with the parole and corrections systems along with a deep concern for the impact of these systems upon individuals and families. Osborne is proud to have Bob as a new member of its Board. ■

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work with a small number of men and women serving long sentences for violent crimes. Using a team approach that includes a *probono* attorney, a volunteer clinical mentor, and an Osborne case manager, the project helps participants to address difficult issues of remorse and responsibility before they become eligible for parole. The team helps participants to closely examine, reflect on, and come to terms with their role in their crime—a critical component of the transformation that will assure their success after release. At the same time we advocate with Parole Board members, encouraging them to focus on rehabilitation and redemption. We have already served eight men and women—(see profile on cover). Through a new grant from the Jessie Ball duPont Fund, we will continue to work with individuals approaching parole eligibility, and at the same time, design a new intervention to work with people in group settings. This work is vital! Even when remorse and responsibility do not lead to release, they may lead to forgiveness and they do lead to transformation. ■



Transforming Lives, Communities and the Criminal Justice System.

Our work with Big Duck, a firm providing smart communications for nonprofits, has culminated in Osborne's new viewbook and annual report. This publication offers an overview of our services and highlights the impact of our work on the lives of our participants during the many transitions they face. To request a printed copy of our viewbook and annual report, please contact us at info@osborneny.org. Before ordering a copy, you may wish to consider downloading our viewbook and annual report from the publications section of our website at www.osborneny.org. Funding for this project was made possible through a grant from Robin Hood Foundation. ■

Osborne News



Osborne was selected to participate in the Sector Strategies Practicum offered by Public/Private Ventures and the Aspen Institute. Our Associate Executive Director **Carolina Cordero Dyer** and Director of Employment and Training Services **Jose Vasquez** represent Osborne at the practicum. Through this process, Osborne

will create an employment program that trains individuals to meet the requirements of a particular industry and places them in jobs in that industry.

We recently established a partnership to provide over 14,000 meals per month for a Bronx-based multi-service agency. The meals are catered by our Food Services staff with assistance from graduates of Osborne's **Fresh Start** program, who serve as interns in the commercial kitchen at our Bronx site. To learn about our catering services, please contact Director of Facilities & Food Services **Nitin Pendharkar** at Npendharkar@osborneny.org.



Through the New York Initiative for Children of Incarcerated Parents, Osborne sought to include children affected by parental incarceration on the New York State Governor's Children's Cabinet agenda. Following several presentations and conference calls, the Cabinet agreed to make children of incarcerated

parents one of three priority areas they are researching and has created a statewide **Subcommittee on Children of Incarcerated Parents**. We will continue advising this subcommittee in shaping its focus and strategies. For more information on the Initiative, please contact Project Director **Tanya Krupat** at Tkrupat@osborneny.org.

With support from the Jacob & Valeria Langeloth Foundation, Osborne recently completed a research project examining health access, beliefs and outcomes for female family members of incarcerated men. Building on our "Get on the Bus" demonstration project, designed to reduce the risk of HIV/AIDS for women with incarcerated male spouses and partners, this research will inform our efforts to improve health outcomes for women affected by the incarceration of partners. The results of the study are now available

online (www.osborneny.org/get_on_the_bus.htm) and are summarized in the "Report on the Support Service Needs



of Women with an Incarcerated Husband or Male Partner," which was spearheaded by Senior Program Analyst **Michelle Portlock**.



Osborne welcomes three new members to its Board of Directors: **Maria Melendez**, **Armen Hratchian**, and **Bob Dennison**. Maria is the Vice President and Deputy Director of Global Pensions at AIG and has held varying leadership positions in financial services. Armen is a Ratings Analyst in the State and Local Government

group at Standard & Poor's McGraw-Hill Companies. He is also chair of Osborne's Program and Advocacy Committee of the Board. Bob is the former chairman of the New York State Parole Board and is actively involved in our advocacy efforts towards parole reform (see feature on page 6). We look forward to the contributions of these Board members, whose expertise will help us strengthen the programs, initiatives and infrastructure of the Osborne Association.

During these times of economic uncertainty, when the demand for our services is on the rise and budget cuts at the City, State and Federal levels have impacted our funding, Osborne needs your support now more than ever. We invite you to make a contribution to Osborne today that makes possible our core mission of supporting people and communities affected by incarceration. For additional information on our funding opportunities, please contact Director of Development **Alicia Guevara** at Aguevara@osborneny.org. Osborne also invites all friends and supporters to stay better connected by emailing us at info@osborneny.org to update your address. Doing so allows us to significantly reduce our mailing costs and its associated environmental impact. ■



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The Osborne Association

**Transforming lives,
communities, and the
criminal justice system**

The Osborne Association offers opportunities for individuals who have been in conflict with the law to transform their lives through innovative, effective, and replicable programs that serve the community by reducing crime and its human and economic costs. Since 1931, we have offered opportunities for reform and rehabilitation through public education, advocacy, and alternatives to incarceration that respect the dignity of people and honor their capacity to change as they achieve self-sufficiency, adopt healthy lifestyles, enter the workforce, form and rebuild families, and rejoin their communities.

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The Osborne Association

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