

3. Do you have any experiences with hiring ex-offenders? Were they positive or negative? What are the problems for an employer when the decision is made to hire an ex-offender? What are the problems for the other employees? What are the difficulties that the ex-offender faces?

#### Ex-offenders and mental illness

1. Nearly 300,000 inmates are identified as having a mental illness. By default, prisons have become America's mental institutions. Yet, prisons generally have inadequate or no resources to help the mentally ill. How does a mental illness feed into the cycle of despair that is often part of re-entry?
2. How does lack of medical insurance affect those dealing with life as an ex-offender on top of needing medication for mental illnesses?

#### Programs making a difference

1. The Gemeinschaft director comments that it is more expensive to keep people in jail than it is to provide support programs for ex-offenders. Why do think, then, that states are so unwilling to support re-entry programs?
2. The RASE House in Harrisburg, Pa., provides transitional living for women. What kinds of skills were they learning? How can living together in this kind of supportive environment be especially helpful to women who have lost their children to the welfare system, among other shared realities?
3. What makes the Atlanta Enterprise Center effective? Why is it important for men to have realistic expectations for jobs?

## WRAP UP

Where do you see signs of hope regarding this topic?

## RESOURCES

### Web sites

Mental Illness and the Criminal Justice System *www.geocities.com/stargazers\_heremental\_illness.html*

Dealing with the Criminal Justice System (posted by National Alliance on Mental Illness) *www.nami.org/Content/ContentGroups/Hotline1/Dealing\_with\_the\_Criminal\_Justice\_System.htm*

TIME magazine, De-Criminalizing Mental Illness *www.time.com/time/health/article/0,8599,1651002,00.html*

U.S. Dept. of Justice, Prison Statistics *www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/prisons.htm*

### Book

*Criminalization of Mental Illness*, by Risdon Slate and W. Wesley Johnson, 2008, Carolina Academic Press.

## AGENCIES IN DOCUMENTARY

Atlanta Enterprise Center  
[www.atlantaenterprisecenter.org](http://www.atlantaenterprisecenter.org)

The RASE Project  
[www.raseproject.org](http://www.raseproject.org)

Gemeinschaft Home  
[www.gemeinschafthome.com](http://www.gemeinschafthome.com)

This discussion guide is downloadable at [www.LongRoadBack.com](http://www.LongRoadBack.com).

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# Discussion Guide



Third Way Media

## INTRODUCTION

The United States is on an incarceration course that correction officials say is unsustainable. Not only does the United States incarcerate more people than any nation on earth, it incarcerates a greater number per capita than any other nation.

Meanwhile, the cost of keeping people behind bars is skyrocketing. Greater and greater percentages of declining state budgets are being plowed into maintaining and expanding prison systems. California currently spends nearly as much on its prisons as it does on its educational system.

To ease the congestion in prisons that often house twice as many prisoners than they were designed for, some prisoners are experiencing early release. Yet, the number of incoming prisoners continues to far exceed those being released.

The expanding prison population is also expanding the number of ex-offenders released back into society. About 650,000 prisoners re-enter local communities each year. Those returning often find it easier to return to prison than to face the stigma and isolation they face upon re-entering their communities. Without community services that assist in the re-entry process, it is almost certain that an ex-offender will return to prison.

*Long Road Back: Ex-Offenders' Struggle for Acceptance* exposes some of the difficulties ex-offenders face in finding jobs, finding their place in the social order, and obtaining housing and medical services. Those on the outside often fear encounters with ex-offenders. Meanwhile, ex-offenders experience fear as their release dates near.

This program seeks to reduce the fear and stigma associated with re-entry. It will take the involvement of church and civic groups, local governments and service boards working together to increase the successful re-entry of ex-offenders into society.

## PREPARATION

Preview the program before showing it to a group. We encourage you to watch the program in its entirety before discussing. (And don't miss the update on the lives of those in the program after the credit roll.) Use the guide for discussion with small groups, religious education classes, workshops, conferences or support groups. Choose the questions that work best for your group.

## DOCUMENTARY DISCUSSION

### General

1. What comments did the offenders make that stuck with you? Why? What surprised you in this documentary? Is there anything that made you angry?
2. Several people in the documentary talked about it being easier to live in prison than on the outside. From what you heard in the program, why do you think this is true?
3. Jamie's story reflects a vicious cycle, familiar to many ex-offenders. She says you can't start over because your criminal past follows you. How do you think Jamie and others like her can break out of this cycle? Is it ever possible?
4. Klaus said that institutionalization hardens you to things like seeing others die. How do you think this affects life on the outside after being incarcerated?
5. Klaus comments that "you're your own worst enemy" when you're behind bars. What do you think that means?

### Ex-offenders and society

1. Statistics show that two-thirds of those released will return to jail. What can the church and society do to keep people from going back to jail?
2. We refer to a jail term as "paying a debt to society." Do we ever actually view the debt as paid? Does society owe people a second chance?
3. How can trust be rebuilt for a person who has spent time incarcerated?

### What can the church community do?

1. Jamie chose not to relate to the church that had been supporting her during her incarceration. What does it mean for a congregation to spend time and effort relating to someone in prison without an ongoing relationship after prison?
2. What are ideas for ways a congregation can support ex-offenders?
3. What can we learn about spirituality from Jamie? How does one's view of God change in different life circumstances?
4. Discuss the impact of imprisonment on family members. How can the church family support those who are left behind when a family member goes to jail? How can they be supportive of the family members when the person is released?
5. Hebrews 13:3 says: "Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering." (NIV) How can congregations carry this verse one step further, to "remember those who have been in prison, as if you had been in prison yourself"?

### What can your community do?

1. What re-entry programs are available in your community? What do you know about them? How can you support such programs?
2. "I've had a million doors slammed in my face," says Anthony. "They say forget the past, but they walk around with picks and shovels and dig it up." How can businesspersons in your community be encouraged to give ex-offenders a chance at jobs in their companies?

