

BEYOND BARS: REJOINING SOCIETY AFTER PRISON

**by Jeffrey Ian Ross and Stephen C. Richards;
Alpha Books, Inc., 2009**

**Reviewed by Matthew Carbery¹, Truman State University (Kirksville,
Missouri, USA).**

At present, 1 in 32 adults in the United States is under some form of correctional supervision. Of the 2.3 million adults currently held in jails and prisons, over 600,000 return to their communities each year (p. xi). These statistics have pushed prisoner reentry to the forefront of national consciousness among U.S. citizens. Re-entry occurs when an offender returns to society after having served a sentence in a correctional institution. Once released, these ex-inmates are expected to live as well-adjusted, law-abiding citizens. Yet frequently, corrections officials ignore the formidable challenges these men and women face in finding employment and housing. Ross and Richards examine these difficulties and others in a unique and personal manner. In *Beyond Bars: Rejoining Society After Prison*, the authors provide released and soon-to-be released offenders a virtual “how-to” manual to improve their chances for successful post-release assimilation.

The authors offer twelve chapters filled with advice that offenders will find relevant in their attempt at successful re-entry. Their guidance is authoritative and insightful and is based largely on the authors’ extensive personal experience with the prison system. Ross previously served as a correctional employee and continues to study inmate populations. Richards offers advice from experience garnered as an inmate previously confined in nine federal prisons. While each now teaches criminal justice at university level, their distinctive coupling of experience and education provides readers with a multi-faceted look at reentry.

This book chronicles the stories of two fictitious offenders, Joe and Jill Convict, as they struggle with the many interrelated social, legal, and financial issues on their journey from prison to the streets. By viewing re-entry through the eyes of these two characters, ex-inmates learn how to avoid similar situations and mistakes. Chapter titles include *Preparing for Release from Prison* (Chapter 1), *Give Me Shelter* (Chapter 5), *Dealing With Your Parole Officer* (Chapter 6), *Finding Work* (Chapter 7), *Family, Love, and Sex* (Chapter 9), *The Devil You Know: Avoiding Alcohol, Drugs, Weapons, and Violence*, and *Special Problems for Jill Convict* (Chapter 12). Each chapter deals with a different set of challenges commonly encountered by new releaseses.

¹ undergraduate student (senior) in Justice Systems

The authors provide a comprehensive and candid set of guidelines to help ex-inmates find work. It is surmised that if a newly-released inmate can locate employment, the probability for successful reentry increases. In light of the global economic crisis, those looking for work in the current job market will undoubtedly experience difficulty. This difficulty is magnified when the job-seeker is an ex-inmate. The authors' explain that the job search will likely prove a long and arduous quest, as ex-prisoners must be prepared to accept work that is menial and low-paying (p. 71). They recognize that by finding and maintaining employment, ex-inmates are able to pay court and parole costs, establish credibility with community corrections officials, and provide for the support of themselves and their dependants. Further recommendations are provided to ensure a successful interview process, including creating a professional résumé and using letters of recommendation.

Emotional and psychological difficulties resulting from prolonged incarceration are also discussed. Feelings of isolation, loneliness, and even abandonment plague inmates and their families. According to the authors, incarceration can often lead to failed marriages and severed communications with parents and siblings. Even one's children may experience feelings of animosity brought on by the perceived desertion of the inmate-parent. The resulting embarrassment and guilt contribute to an offender's emotional strain, and feelings of isolation and helplessness. Strategies are provided to help ex-inmates overcome potential mistakes when reconnecting with loved ones. The directness with which the authors address these common missteps provides a sobering look at the obstacles encountered by newly released offenders.

Beyond Bars offers a unique and unyielding introduction to the hardships that offenders encounter when re-entering society. This book is a must-read for all inmates and ex-inmates, as well as their family members and close friends. To a lesser degree, those involved with community-based corrections will benefit by familiarizing themselves with its pages. Since the book is primarily based on a series of personal observations, as opposed to research-based methodologies, its use within a classroom is limited. The authors' primary objective is to prepare inmates for the long and difficult journey that awaits them. Their collective experiences lend a degree of credibility to a book that must, if it is to achieve its objective, win the trust and respect of the inmate population. Its comprehensive and honest approach will surely capture the attention of those for whom the book was penned.