Title: Food Security for Returning Citizens in the 21st Century

Author Bio: Pastor Kimberly Luck is a licensed and ordained minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ through The Headquarters of A Church Without Walls in Greensboro, North Carolina. She is a graduate of Strayer University with a Bachelor of Science in Criminal Justice and a graduate of Liberty University with a Master of Arts in Human Service Counseling. She uses her God-given gifts of restoration to assist individuals in re-entering society as returning citizens successfully by joining community organizations.

Summary: The subject of mass incarceration leads to discussions about finding ways to help individuals re-enter communities successfully. Pastor Kimberly Luck explores how returning citizens often face food insecurity and shows how food security can act as a means to reduce recidivism. Using a public justice framework, Pastor Luck shows how both individuals and organizations can advocate for changes in policies affecting returning citizens. Faith-based and community organizations can be part of the process by networking, sharing resources, and creating spaces for stories to be told. This interaction can become an educational opportunity for both returning citizens and the broader community. Returning citizens can share their experiences and give voice to their challenges while simultaneously learning about organizations, programs, and opportunities to become more food secure. As a result, collaborative groups that include returning citizens play a role in advocating for legislation and policies that value the humanity and welfare of all citizens, and promotes flourishing of returning citizens.

Twitter: @YLuckkimberly

Photo: Families or individuals at a shelter or in a food line.

Body:

The subject of mass incarceration leads to discussions about finding ways to help individuals re-enter communities successfully. Individuals who have spent time in prison face barriers in finding shelter, employment, and healthcare after being released. Others face additional challenges if they have felony drug convictions. One of these additional challenges is the lack of food security. A public justice perspective conveys that government and the institutions of civil society should be committed to the flourishing of individuals in the political community. What are the public policy implications for society when returning citizens are food insecure? This article has three aims: first, to discuss some of the difficulties returning citizens encounter in obtaining food security, second, to speak about using food security as a tool to help reduce
recidivism and finally, to encourage Christian citizens and other individuals to advocate and help implement policy changes in government agencies and community-based organizations working with returning citizens.

The International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) provides a helpful definition of food security: Food Security means that “all people at all times have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their food preferences and dietary needs for an active and healthy life.”

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has a spectrum that categorizes a person’s food security. The ranges of food security include high food security and marginal food security, while food insecurity includes low food security and very low food security. Returning citizens who sometimes have difficulty in finding and maintaining employment, are denied access to public housing and other public benefits, and have minimal formal education are very likely to have very low food security.

Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (Welfare Reform)

In 1996, President Bill Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) into law. This act was designed to overhaul the existing welfare system by giving limited grants to each state. In turn, each state was required to match the amount granted by the federal government. One program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), was used to assist families in obtaining food security by providing funds for individuals and families meeting certain requirements.

According to Darrel Thompson of the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP), “Congress has repeatedly considered excluding people with certain violent convictions from food stamps eligibility”. Congress gave each state the option to choose whether or not to comply with these regulations for incentives, and over 30 states opted in to receive incentives for participating. As an example, in the state of North Carolina, an individual who has been convicted of a drug felony, outside of a felony class H or I after August 22, 1996, would not be eligible for benefits. Other states have opted out of this reform and have seen a decrease in their recidivism rates. One study found in the American Economic Review stated, “Eligibility for welfare and food stamps at the time of release significantly reduces the risk of returning to prison within one year by up to 10 percent.” Ensuring food security allows individuals to provide for themselves and their families and as well as help them maintain good health. By doing this, government agencies and institutions of civil society can help demonstrate that they value human life and the welfare of all citizens. When a person is released from prison, it is understood they have paid
their debt to society, so punishing them by withholding food security does not produce individual or societal flourishing — it extends their punishment.

Why does Congress get to decide who should or should not eat? A public justice framework would recognize that one of the **roles of government** is to promote the general welfare of its citizens. The government should also enable citizens in need to reach or return to self-sufficiency and be in a position to help others. Finally, as part of its **calling to promote public justice**, government bears responsibility to guard against the emergence of intractable poverty in society and to ensure that appropriate and effective steps are taken to address such poverty. This includes returning citizens. Policies that hinder citizens from being able to obtain food security does not promote public justice. It is not the right role of government to continually punish those who have paid their debt to society by limiting their access to food and nutrition through legislative means.

“Successful reentry into society from the criminal justice system requires access to basic needs such as food, healthcare, and housing as well as employment and training services,” states Darrel Thompson in a policy brief from 2019 entitled **No More Double Punishments**.

As a pastor and a counselor, I have had the privilege to work with people returning from incarceration. In my experience screening individuals for food nutrition services, I know that some individuals who have committed serious crimes can receive services with no problem whether working or not, after their release from prison. In other cases, individuals applying for benefits at social service agencies with a drug felony are informed that they are ineligible for food assistance because of their type of conviction.

Since the welfare reform law passed in 1996, food security for people of color and women were affected as well. People of color and women make up at least 25% of drug offenses. While a public justice perspective encourages individual flourishing, difficulty in accessing food causes more harm than good. Individuals who have low or very low food security are more susceptible to repeat old habits and enter into a cycle of recidivism.

**Christians and a Public Justice Perspective**

In Romans 2:11, the Apostle Paul teaches Christian believers that God is sees no difference between Jews and Gentiles. Paul teaches, and we all recognize that we all have sinned and come short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). Where, then, is the fairness of allowing certain crimes to take precedence over another crime? In the 21st century, community agencies and faith-based organizations can aid individuals creating a fresh start after incarceration. Faith-based communities, as an integral component of civil society, can help their neighbors and ensure that
all people in the community have access to life’s necessities. As part of a public justice framework, community agencies can implement screening questions for individuals applying for their services to ensure that they are food secure. Some faith-based organizations have food pantries and can use their resources to aid returning citizens who are food insecure. Faith-based communities can use their networks and partnerships with other agencies and neighboring churches to also help ensure food security.

Not only does food insecurity cause disruptions to the individual, it also causes difficulty with the returning citizen’s family. There is a need for community organizations and faith-based communities to speak up for returning citizens, imploring government agencies to re-evaluate their current policies impacting food security. There are also opportunities for local congregations to have dialogue in small groups. Both community and faith-based organizations can organize and invite local elected officials to discuss ways a public justice framework can be applied to policies to ensure that they include concerns for returning citizens with respect to food security. Partnership between government agencies and faith-based organizations can enable both to assist individuals by providing innovative services, helping facilitate successful reintegration. Food security is a critical part of successful reentry, and nutrition for families with limited income in the household, single parents, and expectant mothers returning to their communities can help promote flourishing for all involved.

A flourishing political community understands that the common denominator for humanity is that we are all equal, regardless of race, color, sex, origin, ethnic background or criminal record. Concerned Christian citizens can lend their voices to advocate for returning citizens and help enact change that will be beneficial for all of society. Understanding that the disruption to families and marginalized groups of people caused by food insecurity diminishes the capacity to be productive, hinders flourishing, and could lead to recidivism may help people reconsider the policies that directly affect returning citizens.

Ensuring individuals receive proper resources such as access to education, employment, and food security will assist returning citizens in providing for and maintaining their households by giving them a fair chance at survival. Christian citizens and faith-based organizations should also be mindful of the environment and situation to which a person is returning. Some individuals may have caretakers — some may have no support system at all. Faith-based communities have opportunities to partner with governmental agencies to develop services within correctional facilities to help create a positive support system for the returning citizen.

A public justice perspective acknowledges the vital role for faith-based organizations and governmental agencies to partner in creating solutions. Also, Christian citizens can advocate for policies that will aid in the transition of returning citizens. Community organizations can
educate the local communities about pending legislation and how the laws affect them or loved ones. Rev. William Barber’s Poor People’s Campaign is a great example of a community organization helping to amplify the voices of concerned citizens. Other ways to advocate include hosting events and allowing returning citizens to share their stories and experiences for the community to understand the effects.

Communities ought to become involved when issues are addressed and provide clarity on the issues that impact members of the community. When there is understanding as to the destination, people will begin to work together to execute a plan. This plan can potentially generate dialogue between legislators, community members, and the individuals directly affected by these policies. Many times, with some amendments in place, most legislators do not know the consequences of their actions until they are right in front of them.

Jesus addressed the communities in helping the poor and needy with a familiar parable. In Matthew 25:34-36 (NIV), the Bible reads,

“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick, and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’”

This passage speaks about the different ways believers should look after and care for the poor and needy. As Christian believers, we are called to care for our neighbor, as if we were caring for Jesus himself.

Food security is about more than just handing out food or creating a meal. Ensuring food security involves healing one’s emotions and wellbeing, too. Restoring the dignity of returning citizens and their families by helping to ensure food security is a small way that society can communicate its willingness to aid in the reentry process. Faith-based organizations, church congregations, food banks, and everyday citizens can help contribute to the flourishing of returning citizens in their own ways. By recognizing the challenges faced by returning citizens, we can better determine the needed response to the challenges.

God’s desire is for a just and flourishing society for all of creation. As a nation, Christian citizens, along with agencies of civil society (churches, faith-based institutions, community organizations, etc.) can work to influence government agencies to ensure that they work to promote the general welfare of all citizens. A public justice perspective recognizes that ensuring access to food security for everyone, including returning citizens, is one of the ways that we, collectively as a nation, can show that we believe in the restorative work of our justice system and in the redeeming qualities of those created in the image and likeness of God.
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