

▶ METRO MATTERS: A Newsletter On Urban Issues

June-July, 2004

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[Should Inmates Receive Financial Aid for College Study?](#)

by Stephen R. Greenwald and Hakim Hasan

In *Life On The Outside: The Prison Odyssey of Elaine Bartlett*, Jennifer Gonnerman, a staff reporter at The Village Voice, puts a name and a face on the issue of prisoner reentry. Elaine Bartlett served sixteen years in Bedford Hills Correctional Facility as a result of felony drug conviction. Bedford Hills Correctional Facility is a maximum security prison located in the bucolic environs of Westchester County, New York. Ms. Bartlett was granted clemency in 2000 by Governor Pataki. Gonnerman's book raises an important question: what does long-term incarceration prepare ex-offenders for?

Gonnerman writes: "Our nation's prisons now release more than 600,000 people a year. That's more than the entire population of Boston, Seattle, or Washington, D.C." And she goes on to offer a baseline portrait of life on the outside for many ex-offenders. "Most ex-prisoners," Gonnerman writes, "have no money, few job skills, little education, and a history of mental illness."

Elaine Bartlett was far better prepared than most ex-offenders to reenter society. "My education helped me," Elaine says, "to be able to come out and go on fifty-two interviews and not get discouraged." Shortly after being released, Elaine landed a \$18,000

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Upcoming Urban Dialogues

June 29, 2004

How Wealth Perpetuates Inequality

July 20, 2004

Incarceration and Reentry Into Society

Urban Dialogues are held on Tuesdays from 6-8 PM. For information on these program and the speakers, please [click here for further details](#).

Admission is free and open to students, instructors, employees, and the public alike.

a year job (not much but a start) as a residential aide at Project Renewal, a homeless shelter for men in New York City. She was also able to collaborate with Jennifer Gonnerman on a book about her life, and made heroic efforts to keep her family together.

She was incarcerated at an institution that, like many prisons throughout the United States, had a college program that granted college degrees. Elaine explains: " I earned my associates' degree in Behavioral Science from Mercy College in 1999, a year before I was released." She remembers how inmates who wanted to take college courses received help filling out financial aid forms. "The money," Elaine says, "went directly to the college."

However in 1995, federal Pell Grants (originally called the Basic Educational Opportunity Grant as part of President Lyndon Johnson's war on poverty) that were used to pay college tuition for prison inmates were eliminated when the Violent Crime Control Law Enforcement Act was enacted. This legislation eliminated college programs in prisons throughout New York State and the country.

Legislators were reacting to a public outcry: prisoners had far too many rights at taxpayers expense and, in essence, should rot in prison. The notion of college study for convicts was considered "elitist." But this did not amount to prudent public policy or a cost-effective use of taxpayers' money in the long run. Legislators and criminologists must now revisit the issue of reinstating federal, and indeed state, financial aid to prison inmates who want to take college courses and earn a degree.

College programs in prison are an aspect of "pre-release programming" that is essential to the reentry of ex-offenders into civil society. Numerous studies have indicated that post-secondary education for convicted offenders while in prison increases employability, lowers recidivism rates, saves money on reincarceration, represent an effective use of pre-release prison programming, and fosters critical relationships between inmates and responsible members of civil society.

Several years after the college program at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility was eliminated, a remarkable example of civic partnership was forged that allowed Elaine Bartlett and other inmates to resume their studies and earn their degrees. The Women's Prison Education Partnership, a consortium of regional New York Colleges, donated resources and professors to assist Marymount Manhattan College in granting associates and baccalaureate degrees to inmates participating in the program.

These educational institutions have taken the lead in New York State and shown tremendous public policy commonsense in terms of contributing financial resources and human capital towards inmates who want to earn a college degree while in prison. The

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notion of "reentry," either as chic public policy or a practical concern, does not have any realistic meaning if ex-offenders are merely released with forty dollars in his or her pockets, and the clothes on their back. Legislators and government officials should recognize that governmental support towards college programs in prison is a much more effective use of taxpayer's money.

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Public Authorities and the Public Good

by Kevin R. Kosar

Recently, I plowed through a fascinating book, Jameson Doig's [*Empire on the Hudson: Entrepreneurial Vision and Political Power at the Port of New York Authority*](#) (Columbia University Press, 2001). The book details the birth and growth of the bond-issuing, quasi-governmental entity that runs East New Jersey and New York City's transportation hubs. Doig spends the vast majority of the book covering the first quarter of life of the Port Authority (as it is often called), 1921-1950. It's a thick book (500+ pages), and Doig impressively documents and details the growth of this entity into the behemoth it is today.

The subtitle of the book gives away Doig's position, which is that the Port Authority is at its best when it is behaving in an entrepreneurial manner. Who, Doig seems to wonder, wants a Public Authority that is nothing more than "a collector of tolls, a painter of bridges and tunnel roadways" (p. 260)? In the name of fulfilling its mission to give the public well managed transportation ports, the Port Authority should be active, looking to build new projects or to take over existing ones and run them better. Thus, an entity originally designed to handle the water ports and railways thereto grew into an agency with control over bridges, tunnels, airports, the main city bus terminal, and, at one time, the World Trade Center.

This view is not unreasonable. Public authorities have done some wonderful things, things which would not have been done had politicians been involved. But it overlooks two problems. First, a public authority geared toward building new projects is a public authority not geared toward managing current projects. To take but one example, who can defend the dreadful condition of the Port Authority's 42nd Street bus station? It's filthy, unattractive, and the dining facilities are uniformly repellant.

The second problem this perspective overlooks is that an active

public authority is a public authority that is issuing more and more debt. That's how public authorities get money to build new projects: by issuing bonds. The moral hazard is blatant: public authorities, because they are off-budget and unaccountable to the public, have clear incentives to begin new projects, issue more bonds, all in the name of "growing revenue" to pay off the debt it has assumed while at the same time wowing politicians, who can claim credit for providing another public service and jobs.

Now the proverbial chickens have come home to roost. The total debt of New York State's public authorities (and there are hundreds), is \$114.6 billion, more than the total value of California's economy. New York State Comptroller Alan Hevesi and Attorney General Eliot Spitzer recently announced they were going to reform New York State's public authorities. "Authorities have made major contributions to New York, including building and expanding our transportation systems, our public universities and water systems. But authorities have become a semi-secret fourth branch of government with little or no accountability and many have developed a culture of arrogance. It's time for a major reform to bring authorities under control and ensure that they use their resources to serve the important public tasks they have been given, unhindered by waste and corruption." Hevesi and Spitzer have proposed in "The Public Authority Reform Act of 2004" (PARA); reforms to improve all New York public authorities.

Like any other bill, PARA must make it through the legislature in Albany and Governor Pataki's office to take effect. Setting aside Albany's less than impressive policymaking record (for 20 years running the state's budget has been late), this legislation faces additional obstacles.

First among them is this formidable political power of the public authorities themselves. These are huge economic entities with deep pockets and many friends in powerful places. They are unlikely to support legislation that curbs their powers.

Second, in trying to reform all authorities this legislation may fail to deal with the 800-pound gorilla of the bunch: Port Authority. As Doig detailed in his book, Congress enacted the compact authorizing the establishment of Port Authority; and Port Authority is the creature of two states (New York and New Jersey). Any reform passed in New York affecting the Port Authority must also be approved by New Jersey's legislature and governor (to say nothing of pressures likely to come from Washington, D.C.).

The third problem is the bond market. While New York's and the nation's economy do seem to be improving, they are far from strong (note the recent jitters in both the stock and bond markets). Any reform of public authorities must be consider the effects on the bond market and the economy. Again, these authorities have \$114.6 billion in debt out there.

Finally, there's the matter of accountability. Public authorities were an anti-political contrivance, born of Progressive Era thinking. To keep them free from politicians, who would try to steer their projects and staff them with patrons, public authorities were insulated from politics and governance. Think of Robert Moses, leader of the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority and road builder, demolishing neighborhoods as politicians and citizens meekly cried, "Stop." Making public authorities publicly accountable requires changing their nature, no mean feat.

It would seem that the only way to control public authorities is to pass legislation to limit their debt-issuance powers. It would also be helpful to create greater lines of accountability between elected officials and authority leaders and to require much more public disclosure of authorities and their financial activities. These three changes can stop the piling up of debt and systemic economic risk it creates; these changes also would give the public more power to punish politicians when scandals erupt at public authorities. Without these changes and others, there is little reason to expect public authorities' debt to go down or the Port Authority bus station to get any cleaner.

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Hevesi and Spitzer's statement can be found [here](#).

The Comptroller's report on public authorities in New York can be found [here](#).

Recent Notable Articles and Studies

Small Business Administration: Minority Business Loan Program Questioned

Jonathan J. Bean, a professor of history at Southern Illinois University, has written much on this program. In short, he thinks the program is dreadful. In an article which drew surprisingly little attention, Bean describes a corrupt and scandal-ridden program that is bad policy and bad for minorities, the very individuals who it is supposed to assist. "Shame of the Cities: Setting Aside Justice for the 'Disadvantaged,'" can be downloaded from the website of [The Independent Review](#).

Recycling More Expensive Than Dumping

New York City's Independent Budget Office (IBO) studied the cost to the City of recycling and dumping. IBO found that recycling is 13% pricier. Of course, the only costs measured were the actual cost of the programs; other costs, such as damage to the environment from dumping garbage into landfills, were not included. You can download free copies of IBO's *Refuse and Recycling: Comparing*

the Costs from [IBO's website](#).

Urban Reports Galore

Speaking of New York City's Independent Budget office, its website offers reports galore. Topics range from the budget to housing to welfare and the "World Trade Center Recovery." It's a trove for urbanologists. Visit it at <http://www.ibo.nyc.ny.us/>.

Federal Actions Threaten Housing Vouchers for Low-Income Families

So says the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) under the Bush administration has already proposed cuts to the Section 8 program in 2005. In April, though, the administration moved to reduce the amount it pays toward the program in the present year. The result: either states and cities can make up the difference or fewer people can receive housing vouchers. HUD may manage to patch over the problem this year, but the picture is unclear. See Barbara Sard and Will Fischer, [New HUD Policy Will Force Immediate Cuts In Housing Voucher Assistance for Low-Income Families](#) and David Chen, ["Extra \\$150 Million Is Found to Pay for Housing for the Poor,"](#) *New York Times*, May 21, 2004 (available for purchase).

The New Welfare Office?

The image of public assistance offices isn't pretty: fluorescent lights, shoddy furniture, dull grey file cabinets, long lines, endless paperwork... Dreadful to work in and often degrading to visit. Hopefully, though, times are changing. Driven in part by the work requirement pressures of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (P.L. 104-193), cities are beginning to spiff up their assistance offices. The *New York Times* visited one City "jobs assistance center" and described it thus: "The dingy hallways now appear to have a color-coded scheme. Electronic kiosks have sprouted in the once shadowy corners..." Computers can bring up client case histories in a blink. Unfortunately, the long lines remain, and clients can still spend the better part of a day trying to learn if they qualify for benefits. See Leslie Kaufman, ["At Modernized Welfare Center, Some Things Are Hard to Fix,"](#) *New York Times*, March 1, 2004, p. B1.

"Leaving the Homeless Out in the Cold"

Adjusted for inflation, the U.S. spent about \$8 billion treating mental illnesses in 1961. Today, government spends over \$70 billion. Why aren't we getting better results? And how can a compassionate society allow so many mentally ill persons out on the streets or languishing in prisons (5% of street people and 16% of the incarcerated are mentally ill). E. Fuller Torrey, an MD and author, tries to explain why in "Leaving the Homeless Out in the Cold." In part, Torrey writes, the problem is that in the name of rights the U.S. has backed away from forcible treatment and left the

mentally ill free to seek or not seek treatment. Not surprisingly, the latter happens often. Misguided policies, inadequate federal spending on research, and deinstitutionalization have also had negative effects. It's provocative reading and can be downloaded from [City Journal's website](#).

“Class Acts: How New York City Newspapers Covered the Budget Crisis After 9/11”

The way it's presented in civics class, the press is supposed to provide the public with good information on what government is doing. That way, voters can reward or punish politicians accordingly. 'If only it were so,' says a new report commissioned by the Drum Major Institute. Professor Robert M. Entman of North Carolina State University examined New York City newspaper coverage of the budget crisis of 2002. His conclusion: newspaper coverage described the negotiations melodramatically. Citizens reading the stories were given little information on how the varying proposals would affect them. "The question of 'Who gets what?' is at the very core of politics and public policy, yet this study shows it's extremely difficult for citizens to figure that out when it comes to the major budget decisions facing New York City," said Professor Entman. You may learn more at the [website of The Drum Major](#).

The Creative Class: A Key to Urban Growth?

A couple years back, Professor Richard Florida of Carnegie Mellon caused a sensation in urban planning circles. His book, [The Rise of the Creative Class](#), argued that cities wanting to become economic boomtowns should make themselves amenable to the "creative class," a heterogeneous cluster of youthful movers and shakers. Many cities took Florida's advice and began spending tax dollars to build bike paths and amenities to draw members of creative class (To get a sense of the hullabaloo, visit the [CreativeClass.org](#) website, which describes how Florida's ideas are "going global.") Now, along comes Steve Malanga of *City Journal* who says, "Wrong, wrong, wrong." Malanga contends that Florida misunderstood the causes of urban economic growth: low taxes, well-policed streets, and good schools. The middle class, two-income bourgeois insurance executive, not the nose-ring wearing computer programmer, is who cities want to draw. It's an impish article and even argues that the cities that Florida trumpets are economically underperforming. Thus far, no letter responding to Malanga's critique has been published in *City Journal*. Too bad- it's a debate worth continuing. Steve Malanga, ["The Curse of the Creative Class,"](#) *City Journal*, Winter 2004, pp. 36-45.

Relatedly, see:

Alexander Von Hoffmann, [Brick By Brick, House by House: The](#)

[Rebirth of America's Urban Neighborhoods](#) (Oxford University Press, 2003)

Paul Grogan and Tony Proscio, [Comeback Cities: A Blueprint for Urban Neighborhood Revival](#) (Westview Press, 2000)

CONFERENCE: Urban America- The New Realities

Pace University of Manhattan, New York City invites folks to attend the Tenth Annual International Conference of Urban and Metropolitan Universities, October 2-5, 2004. To submit a paper or for further information, see their [website](#).

Recent Books of Interest

*David Quigley, [The Second Founding: New York City, Reconstruction, and the Making of American Democracy](#) (Hill & Wang)

*Robert Mark Silverman, ed., [Community-Based Social Organizations: The Intersection of Social Capital and Local Context in Contemporary Urban Society](#) (Wayne State University Press)

*Lydia G. Segal, [Battling Corruption in America's Public Schools](#) (Northeastern University Press)

*Michael Willrich, [A City of Courts: Socializing Justice in Progressive Era Chicago](#) (Cambridge University Press)

*Peter H. Lindert, [Growing Public: Social Spending and Economic Growth Since the Eighteenth Century](#) (Cambridge University Press)

*Alexander Von Hoffmann, [Brick By Brick, House by House: The Rebirth of America's Urban Neighborhoods](#) (Oxford University Press, 2003)

*Paul Grogan and Tony Proscio, [Comeback Cities: A Blueprint for Urban Neighborhood Revival](#) (Westview Press, 2000)

Metropolitan College of New York Publications

Report: [People and Politics in America's Big Cities](#)

Report: [Bridging the Gap: Higher Education and Career-Centered Welfare Reform](#)