

Innovation in Hard Times:
How to Reduce both Crime and Incarceration

June 7, 2010

Cannon House Office Building

By Jennifer Smith, Intern, ICCA

“Can the criminal justice system continue to cut crime while also reducing the use of jail and prison?” Was the question posed by the panel leader Greg Berman at the beginning of the presentation on Innovation in Hard Times: How to Reduce both Crime and Incarceration. Mr. Berman, the Director of The Center for Court Innovation, questioned a panel of four experienced experts in the field of criminal justice on the topic of reducing crime and incarceration. The experts included; James Burch the Acting Director of the Bureau of Justice Assistance U.S. Department of Justice, The Honorable Judge Jonathon Lippman the Chief Judge for the state of New York, Timothy Murray the Executive Director for the Pretrial Justice Institute, and Chris Walter the Director of Harlem Reentry Court.

One of the first topics discussed was whether the panel believed that justice has changed. All of the panel members agreed that in many ways justice has changed for the better. Mr. Birch discussed that a few years ago there became a sense of emergency in the criminal justice field and with that sense of emergency came resources and with that came ideas. This was the start of a better change for justice.

Mr. Murray discussed that he believe there was more chatter on the hill about the crime act and that when people support, believe, and subscribe to these ideas change will happen. He also talked about noticing people weren't complaining about the small budget but trying to make the most out of what budget they had.

Judge Lippman talked about the dramatic drop in crime in New York. The factors he believed contributed to this are innovated police, focusing on all areas of the city, policing lower levels of crime, communities being more interested, and New York have a more vibrant infrastructure. New York has turned its attention to reducing substance abuse, prison populations, and recidivism. Also they have made sure to look at what happens when the prisoners leave so they can stop the revolving door affect that they have had in the past.

Mr. Walter was then asked about the crime in Harlem and how they are working to reduce that without incarceration. He discussed that Harlem historically struggles with crime but it is much lower than the past. Some statistics he gave about Harlem is that one in twenty black men will go to prison and half of the children there grow up in poverty. A problem in Harlem is young black men in the community have problems with their relationships with police officers. Harlem is working on how they address crime and working with addiction. Harlem has started getting the community involved and people want to volunteer and help.

Mr. Murray then discussed that one problem with our criminal justice system being so over populated is that sixty percent of people in jails are there because they can't pay a bond. Most of these people do not pose a danger or risk to the community. Our system focuses on those who have cash who in most cases are crooks. He has the idea that we need to change things according to risk and not dollars. We need to take the focus off the status quo.

The group then talked about a new idea called field initiated innovations where communities can experiment with the ideas that they have that they wouldn't normally get to because it is risky and they have no evidence. This will help fund these ideas. Then these communities can show others what has worked for them.

The last question Mr. Berman asked the panel was what gives them hope in the future and what gives them anxiety. Mr. Walter's hope for the future was that community members are becoming more interested. He also is excited about all of the data they are receiving.

Mr. Murray thinks it is scary that we still believe we can just make a decision to lock someone up and move on instead of doing ongoing work. "We need to overcome wanting to lock someone up no matter what the crime committed was," Mr. Murray stated. But he has hope because we are finally discussing these issues.

Mr. Burch has hope in the second chance act and that we are setting the bar so high. He also has hope because we are being smart about crime. But he feels anxiety because it is hard to accomplish this and we want results so quickly.

Judge Lippman has hope because the government and communities are wanting, supporting, and investing in innovation. He also has hope because we are investing in alternatives.