

Convicted Credibility

NuLeadership, A Think Tank Staffed With Formerly Incarcerated Researchers, Lobbies for Its Brethren to Have a Say in Criminal Justice Policymaking.

By Katti Gray

At the close of his 25 years of winding through New York's prisons, former Black Panther Eddie Ellis walked away in 1994 with four college degrees he earned while incarcerated and kept treading his singular path as an activist on the issues of police, courts, crime and punishment. As he had done in prison, he organized felons and former felons. He conducted community workshops, lectured and lobbied. In 2000, before conferees who, except for him, were White criminologists and law enforcement officials, Ellis dared to ask how, given the topics at hand, he was the solitary ex-prisoner and sole Black among the invited analysts.

"None of them, of course, (were) directly related to the Black and Latino communities, the substance-abuse communities, prison communities. So when it was my turn to speak, that had to be the first question I put on the table," says Ellis, 67, founder and executive director of the Center for NuLeadership on Urban Solutions. Housed for the last five years at Medgar Evers College, the City University of New York's Brooklyn outpost, NuLeadership was officially christened an academic center by CUNY administrators in December. NuLeadership, the only think tank of its kind devoted to analyzing and helping rejigger a variegated U.S. system of justice, is staffed full time almost entirely by researchers who are ex-prisoners.

Its second tier of researchers comprise the NuLeadership Policy Group, a nationwide complement of what its administrators count thus far as 300 ex-prisoners of a certain profile: Each must have been out of prison at least five years. Each has publicly stated the reasons they landed behind bars. Each holds at least a bachelor's degree. Each is an executive in an organization addressing head-on the policymaking aspects of adjudicating crime. Equally to the point, they are helping shape policies surrounding the re-entry of ex-prisoners into nonprison life. Annually, roughly 700,000 people across the country are returning to their home communities of mainly minorities and poor people who, NuLeadership and like-minded policymakers contend, should have some say in the methods and mechanisms involved in that return.

"When criminal justice policymaking happens, it's important that the formerly incarcerated are an essential part of the discussion. It adds a certain cultural competency to that discussion," says Glenn Martin, 38, vice president for development and director of the David Rothenberg Center for Public Policy at the Fortune Society, a New York project fixed on post-prison re-entry and alternatives to incarceration, particularly for nonviolent crimes.

He was born in Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood and was criminal from the time he was a teen until an armed robbery conviction brought him six years at Attica. There, through a now moribund prison-based college study program, he earned a bachelor's degree in

social science from Jesuit-run Carnisius College in Buffalo, New York. Martin says engagement as a member of NuLeadership Policy Group is tantamount to a second job. "NuLeadership demands extra time out of my schedule. But it brings an incredible value to my work and affords me a certain type of credibility among my constituents," says Martin, who left prison about nine years ago.

The research at NuLeadership, which already has calculated the impact of such recent legislative initiatives as a proposed ratcheting up of federal laws against gangsters and gang violence, is three-pronged. NuLeadership also was part of a coalition that championed the reversal of extra-punitive Rockefeller Drug Laws and the enactment of prison health care reforms. The research at NuLeadership is three-pronged:

- The impact of parole on those who've received the longest prison sentences; their rates of recidivism; and the dangers that violent offenders, particularly, pose to communities they reinhabit upon parole
- Gaps between available social services and other re-entry services and the tally of returning ex-prisoners who can access them and those who can and/or do not
- The financial, emotional and psychological costs to families when members of their households are incarcerated. (Along with that, the impact of a members' absences on labor markets; the impact of absentee fatherhood on Black and brown communities that contribute disproportionately to the prison population; and trends in gang-related activity that can be linked to rates of incarceration.)

In addition to those long-term studies, NuLeadership is investigating and challenging U.S. Census protocols that count prisoners as residents of communities where they are imprisoned, rather than neighborhoods from which they hail originally. (Several congressional districts in New York exist largely due to the rural prison populations.) Given that Census data dictate disbursement of federal funds, attorney Peter Wagner, executive director of the Northampton, Mass.-based Prison Policy Initiative, considers NuLeadership's foray into that area crucial.

"It has national repercussions," says Wagner, a regular commentator on Ellis' Saturday Pacifica Radio broadcast, *On the Count: The Prison & Criminal Justice Report*. They met while at the Soros Foundation, where Wagner was a criminal justice fellow and Ellis a consultant.

Adding Value

In 2002, Soros' program officers granted Ellis \$250,000 to identify others across the country who Ellis insisted matched his own profile as a formerly incarcerated activist of color and whom he believed should be parties in criminal justice policy debates.

"This issue of race and of who's allowed at the table, is pervasive," says Dr. Divine Pryor, 49, the center's deputy executive director. "Some have tried to say we cannot produce credible research because we're formerly incarcerated and, therefore, cannot be objective. Because we are formerly incarcerated we have the most to gain by being totally objective, totally empirical."

Pryor was guilty, he says, of hijacking fur coats, jewelry and weapons from planes flying into New York and selling that cache in exchange for narcotics and cash. New York state's

various prisons held him for 20 years, during which he earned bachelor's and master's degrees in sociology and a doctorate in criminal justice from the State University of New York.

For his part, Ellis, whose highest degree is a Master's of Divinity from Union Theological Seminary, was convicted in 1970 of murdering a man he says he neither knew nor saw in the flesh. Ellis says he did not kill the man. (The charges against him resulted from activities by the FBI's COINTELPRO or Counterintelligence Program, which, the courts eventually concluded, covertly and sometimes illegally, infiltrated groups such as the Black Panthers, NAACP and National Lawyers Guild.)

Ellis was present during 1971's pivotal inmate revolt at Attica. Prisoners protested such conditions as being allowed one shower per week and one roll of toilet paper a month. The riots gave rise to reform in New York state that trickled out to other locales. In addition to physical comforts, came other major changes. Among them was that combination of federal and state financing that paid for inmates to enroll in prison-based college programs and other groundbreaking endeavors. A swell of tough-on-crime measures in the mid-1990s terminated the bulk of those programs. And, yet, there is growing recognition by corrections chiefs in several states that those academics programs were far from folly.

"Overwhelmingly," says Ellis, who, like Pryor, teaches at Medgar Evers professor on policing and the economics and politics of criminal justice, "it has been demonstrated by the research, the more education you have, the more likely you are, as a formerly incarcerated person, to have real prospects for advancing. Even in the face of that reality, the prison college programs have been eviscerated. There is a move on now to return that but even that is caught up in bipartisan rancor in Washington and the financial realities of this recession."

Economic and political winds and whimsy notwithstanding, Ellis says, what NuLeadership aims for is a steady reframing of who can and should be at the table as policy is drafted. While the circle of policymakers has continued to widen, the comparative lack of formerly incarcerated individuals and researchers of color lingers. And that has yielded, he argues, a one-size-fits-all approach to community re-entry that does not consider the lingering impacts of race and class. "Get an education. Take a bath three times a day and be respectful of authority. Be an example to your children and don't beat your wife.' That's what, in this traditional model, has been said frequently to formerly incarcerated people as soon as they get home. It sounds like I'm being facetious but it's true," Ellis says.

He cited a body of longitudinal research by, among others, Harvard University professor Dr. Bruce Western, formerly of Princeton University: "A white man with a criminal record has a greater chance of being hired in the New York labor market than a Black man with no record. This was tested ... I cite all of that to say that the obstacles that Blacks and Latinos coming out of prison face are real and not adequately addressed by traditional programs."

Staying Informed

NuLeadership's break with tradition is nuanced, right down to the language it chooses to employ. "Formerly incarcerated" is the researchers' preferred descriptor. Ex-convict "applies to people who've been ex-communicated. It carries a connotation and denotation, incites a certain image in the public mind of individuals who are devoid of human-ness," says Pryor, who's also a

consultant to the Kings County District Attorney's Office in Brooklyn and the New York Police Department.

NuLeadership researcher Kyung Ji Kate Rhee, also director of the Institute for Juvenile Justice Reform and Alternatives, a NuLeadership offshoot, seeks to determine how to reframe the criminal justice discourse, by including affected communities in it and demanding more accountability on the part of communities and by doing incarceration costs analyses. For example, New York is one of two states—the other is North Carolina—where nonviolent 16-year-old defendants can be tried as adults. Rhee's 2-year-old institute, which Ellis originally launched as the Prison Moratorium Project, began doing dollar-for-dollar comparisons in state construction expenditures on prisons and the decline in aid to public university students who, in the 1990s, were denouncing tuition hikes.

"It's important to keep that information out there," says Chino Hardin, 29, who as a NuLeadership field coordinator facilitates workshops and advocate training. Hardin was in and out of jail from ages 13 through 20. "Random things: Gang-related violence, assault, grand theft auto, possession of narcotics. I'm third-generation incarcerated. My mother was in jail for narcotics. My grandmother killed two husbands, batterers, back before there was a term called battering ... The qualitative work and the quantitative data are equally important. They are tools to inform the community how to make better decisions. How to make decisions, period, and to be a part of our own self-determination."

Hardin is studying for her GED and, she says, planning to enroll at Medgar Evers. She also grew up in Brooklyn, which harbors two of the seven New York neighborhoods whose residents, as of January 2009, accounted for more than 50 percent of New York state's prison population, according to Justice Department. Blacks and Latinos comprise roughly 77 percent of New York's entire prison population.

In 2008, the most recent year for which federal Justice Department figures are available, 556,900, or roughly 39 percent, of the nation's roughly 1.43 million state and federal inmates were Black, while Blacks represent 12.8 percent of the nation's population; 471,400 were white; and 301,200 were Hispanics, who represent 15.4 percent of the nation's population.

Those numbers are not mere abstractions for NuLeadership's Eloni Blake, 19, a Medgar Evers student who helps maintain the center's data bank. "My dad is in prison now, my mom did time, and my brothers are in and out of jail. It's not that I'm sad about that, but I do feel very unfortunate at times," Blake says, who aims to major in criminal justice and eventually do child advocacy.

NuLeadership, though underwritten by private philanthropists and government funders, has not been without its skeptics. The New York Post last year editorialized against a recent state grant to NuLeadership, questioning its prudence. That is precisely the divide over who should be a part of policymaking that Ellis and cohorts are hoping to bridge, "so that ultimately we can create a system that punishes those who break the law and, at the same time, provides them with what is necessary to reconstruct their lives and become law-abiding citizens," he says. "All our research points to the wisdom of constructing this new approach to doing justice in America. We see it as a model for the way justice should be carried out."