

Rod Nunn

📅 Mon, 2/22 11:10AM ⌚ 31:30

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

individuals, people, prison, community, incarcerated, program, concordance, workplace, workforce development, state, healing journey, incarceration, cycle, education, criminal justice system, louis, rod, research, impact, reduce

SPEAKERS

Rod Nunn, Omkari Williams



Omkari Williams 00:11

Hello, and welcome to Stepping Into Truth, the podcast where we take on the issues of race, gender and social justice. I'm your host Omkari Williams, and I'm very happy you're here with me today. Hosting this podcast is such a joy for me. I'm privileged to speak with people who are out in the world making a difference with their day jobs, their programs, their art, and their activism. If you would like to support me in doing this work, you can do so for as little as \$3 a month by becoming a member of my Patreon community. You can go to patreon.com/OmkariWilliams and sign up. There's also a link on my website omkariwilliams.com.



Omkari Williams 01:03

My guest today is on the frontlines of fighting to break the cycle of reincarceration, which impacts approximately 100 million people in the United States, making it a significant societal issue. Roderick Nunn DM has led workforce development for three governors. Most recently, he served at St. Louis Community College as president of Forest Park campus, and Vice Chancellor of Economic Development and Workforce Solutions. Under Nunn's leadership, the college won several awards for excellence and innovation in workforce development. In his role as Executive Vice President, Head of Education and Employment, Rod oversees the staff that provide education and job readiness

programming, and helps lead the Concordance Employment Agency. It is my great pleasure to welcome Rod to the podcast. Hi, Rod, how are you?



Rod Nunn 01:42

Hi Omkari. How are you? I'm doing well.



Omkari Williams 02:01

I am doing well also. I've been so looking forward to this conversation because I don't think that people necessarily recognize the scope of the problem that you are trying to address. And one of the things, when I was doing my research for this conversation, that really struck me was the statistic that there are approximately 100 million people impacted by the cycle of reincarceration. And I honestly hadn't realized the number was so high. And what I'd like to start with is talking about those numbers, and what that means both in individual and in community terms. And I want to break it into those three areas. So let's start with the individual first. How does this re incarceration epidemic that we're undergoing impact the individual, and then we'll go from there.



Rod Nunn 02:57

Yeah, that's a great way to start. And thank you for having me on this podcast excited about the opportunity to have this conversation with you. So yeah, this whole cycle of incarceration, mass incarceration, we hear it framed in different ways, has had a devastating impact at the individual level and the community level. I mean, I can tell you what I see with my eyes every day and what, you know, what my lived experience has been, you know. So I grew up in East St. Louis, it's a community that's been ravaged with poverty and crime. Those two things they live together and what you see with your eyes, when when you grew up in a community like that, and I didn't realize it until years later, you see a lot of hopelessness. You see people who don't really have a sense of what tomorrow can bring for them in a positive way.



Rod Nunn 03:50

You see a breakdown in the family, you know. You see people missing meals, you see people getting evicted from their residence. You see people that have their uncles or brothers, and seeing men getting hauled off to prison. And then if you read the research and and look at the data that comes with that, and you start to realize, wow, you know, so America, this wonderful nation that we live in, it represents 5% of the global

population, but 25% of the world's prison population. And we know that, you know, Black men are six times more likely to be incarcerated than white men.

R

Rod Nunn 04:32

We know that, you know, if we look at Black and Brown, so called Black and Brown, I mean, represents 32% of the US population 56% of the overall incarcerated population. And so we see guys coming through our doors every day, with a sense of hope, with a sense of like resilience, that they want something better for themselves, for their families, and their community. But it is it is definitely something that has had a devastating impact on individuals.

R

Rod Nunn 05:04

I might also say that, you know, it's also associated with with trauma. So where we see poverty, and where we see crime and incarceration, we also see trauma. And by trauma, I'm not just talking about, you know, neglect and abuse, but I'm also talking about community violence and the things you see and experience over a lifetime. And so what happens with that, and we see it in our guys, our men and our women, I should say, it also leads to poor health outcomes, mental health, substance use disorder, poor academic performance, you know, and all those things. And so that's, you know, that's what we're experiencing here at Concordance. That's what we are here to address.



Omkari Williams 05:50

It's interesting to me as I listen to you, because I'm thinking about this in the scope of what does it actually mean, for a family when a family member is in prison? Because I think that we're taught to think of the criminal justice system as corrective I mean, we even call it the you know, correctional institutions. But that's not actually what happens in those institutions, people do not come out of those institutions with a better sense of themselves as participating members of society generally. So that impact on a family member, I mean, that must be really profound, because there's got to be a lot of things tied up in there. I mean, shame. And just a sense of this is just the way it's always been, this is the way it's always going to be, what's your experience of that kind of thing?

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Rod Nunn 06:52

Yeah, I mean, I've worked more on the, you know, the education of the employment side of things. But because we have this sort of integrated, holistic model, I'm interacting with a

therapist and our clinicians all the time. And so yeah, I'm very, very much in touch with the fact that our participants have experienced this sort of this breakdown in the families, what I refer to it as "disconnect" from, from their loved ones. Definitely feeling all the things you mentioned Omkari, about the sense of shame, and guilt, you know, and you carry this, this negative kind of badge, you know, of having a felony on your record, you carry it back home, you carry it into the community, you carry it everywhere with you, and it can be a heavy weight to bear certainly impacts what's happening in the home with a family,



Omkari Williams 07:47

I would think that there would be a correlation between that kind of experience and domestic violence, because that kind of despair does not generally bring out the best in people. Is that something that you've had any experience of in your conversations with the therapists who work at Concordance, really specifically between domestic violence and the sense of hopelessness that comes along often with having a felony conviction on your record and feeling like how am I ever going to get a job? How am I going to ever make something of myself with that as the baggage that I'm carrying?



Rod Nunn 08:30

Yeah, I mean, we certainly see more generally, like this sort of idea of needing to be able to sort of, let's just talk about it this way. So social norms, the ability to sort of, to cope and to get along, and the normal things of everyday life. You know, when a person, you know, asks you a simple question, like, for example, in the workplace, a supervisor says, Hey, I need you to complete this work within the next two hours, we got to get this order out. And you don't have necessarily the cognitive frame to receive that, that says, hey, that's just an order for my supervisor, to keep the company going. So anger management, for example, and reacting to just things that you and I would consider normal. These individuals don't necessarily have because they were socialized in a very, very different way. In a culture of poverty, in a culture, perhaps, where the family was not a stabilizing influence to mitigate against that. In a situation where they didn't have the experiences that we would have had in terms of formal education and getting through the school system in a way that helps socialize them through the norms. And you see a lot of if you look at the criminal records, you know, you see quite a few issues of violence, whether it's domestic in nature or something, a crime against the property that belonged to another individual. So yeah, we definitely see that.



Omkari Williams 09:55

Yeah, I would think that that would be one of the trickiest things to navigate. Because also, then once you been in prison, that whole system also sets you up in a way to engage with authority in a way that is probably not the healthiest way outside of the confines of a prison. So, absolutely, yeah, I can see how this becomes, in its own way, a sort of self fulfilling prophecy cycle of, this is why people are reincarcerated. So lastly, in terms of these three areas, I want to talk about how the community is impacted when people are re incarcerated, and why you are working so hard to break that cycle.



Rod Nunn 10:45

For me, I think of it just from my own lived experience being born and raised in East St. Louis, which, you know, on my block, you know, when I go back home, my mom and dad's still live on 80th Street in St. Louis. And so I remember going back after I started this work five years ago, my father and I, we were just kind of looking down the block, and we can count so say, there were like, 40 houses on this block. Probably 30 of them has somebody that was incarcerated, or, you know, had been incarcerated or, or murdered. Or, you know, has some sort of interaction with the criminal justice system.



Rod Nunn 11:23

And it contributes to this sort of negative social gravity, you know, that you see with drugs and crime, and you know, all the things that kind of live with that. And so, yeah, I mean, our communities have been depleted, and certainly incarceration and criminal justice system is part of that. We look, you know, sort of at some of the data that goes along with that. So economically, I don't believe this nation's economy can go where it can go, potentially, with leaving a whole class of people behind. You know, right before the recession we had employers, and we still do we have employers screaming at us, like, Hey, can we hire your guys? So you have guys for us, we can't find people. And so I mean, this represents a tremendous alternative source of talent. So there is like this economic workforce development angle that I like to talk about with, with how it impacts at the sort of the broader community level as well.



Omkari Williams 12:29

Yeah. Okay. So along with the economic impact angle, there is the whole system that you at Concordance Academy, are using to try and break this cycle. So what are some of the tools that you all use?

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Rod Nunn 12:49

Yes, yes. So, you know, as you've been kind of talking about this sort of individual and community impact, so it is a, it is a big problem that, you know, has several kinds of issues. So we know that over three quarters of the individuals who are incarcerated will return to prison, or be rearrested within five years. And so if you're going to make an impact on that, the research will show you that you got to look at several things. 80% of these individuals struggle with with substance use disorder. So you know, you have to address that. Many of them have mental health issues. Nearly all of them have some form of trauma that they've experienced at an earlier age. And as you as you cited accurately earlier, prison itself is very traumatic.

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Rod Nunn 13:37

So there is this healing process that you got to start with. So our model really is sort of a healing, first time type of approach. I mean, we believe if we can get individuals on their healing journey, and making sure that they're getting all of the behavioral health issues addressed, so that they can become stabilized. And then you can begin to tether that with, you know, sort of this job readiness, this education, you know, sort of beginning to kind of help them unlearn and relearn. Some of the social norms are going to work well for them, not only in the workplace, within the community and in the home with the family. So that has been our approach.

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Rod Nunn 14:17

We have 12 services kind of integrated under one roof. These are evidence based interventions. We spent several years, there was a sort of this research planning phase that occurred. We started serving individuals back in 2016, around May spring of the year. But prior to that there was a run up to that that included some research by the Washington University School of Social Work, the Brown school, one of the top institutions in the nation, Omkari, they looked at over 100,000 studies of interventions that were proven to work with a population. They kind of whittled that down to those that had a positive impact. So we created a reentry model based on some of the best research that you can find.

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Rod Nunn 15:05

And what it showed us is that if we offered the right services in the right sequences, we could in fact, reduce reincarceration rates. And so we start in pre-release, we have a clinician and a therapist that's working with the individual while they're incarcerated.

We're building that rapport, that trust. Getting them to kind of imagine a future on the outside, that is one that has them sort of in this sort of healing process, you know. And then when they get out, so that that that occurs for about six months.

R

Rod Nunn 15:37

When they get out of prison, they come to the Academy, and they get a schedule, that's a pretty intense schedule. And for the first six weeks of that, that period of time, they're in what we call the IOP, the inpatient outpatient part of our program. It is heavy, heavy, heavy, kind of focus on yourself work. On getting yourself to a place of healing, focus on your coping strategies, focus on getting reintroduced to your family getting reintroduced to what life on the outside is like. Everybody sort of has this life plan that has several goals in it to address their behavioral health needs and their community and life skill needs. And so there, there's this sort of sequential approach that we take to it. And so my team members, the educators and career coaches, then come alongside as they're in this healing journey. And we began to work on skill development.



Omkari Williams 16:34

Okay, so this is really interesting to me, because one of the things that I found out was that you gave this statistic of reincarceration rearrest, but the thing that struck me in going a little deeper into that statistic is that, when you look at people who are under 21 years of age, when they're released from prison, they had the highest rearrest rates. Something like 67% of them are rearrested. And I mean, a) you're talking about someone who's barely an adult, having spent time in prison, but then b) you're talking about 67% of those people likely going back to prison, and how that sort of spirals and just keeps that cycle going. So it's interesting to me that you all start while they're still incarcerated, and build that relationship. How did that plan come to be? Was that part of what the Brown School study was talking about?

R

Rod Nunn 17:39

Yeah, absolutely. So part of our planning process, part of our research process involved, meeting with the State Department of Corrections. Meeting with some of the scientific experts around the country on this. And the research shows, yeah, that some of the stuff that you need to do to help the population, you need to establish that relationship while they're incarcerated. So that was a very important part of it. Because know, when they get out and life starts to happen to them, and all the distractions that occur, you know, in the communities or where they return, it's good that you've built that sense of trust and

rapport, you know. And they want to be a part of what you're, what you're doing, and you gotta to get to them before they get out.



Omkari Williams 18:23

It makes perfect sense when you talk about it. And it honestly is not something that I would have thought about, if you hadn't said it. In my head, this program actually started once they got out. But yeah, once you're out, I mean, life comes at you fast and hard. And if you don't have that structure that you already know is there, it's got to be much harder to build that structure, then. So that's actually a really, that feels like a really critical piece of this and something that people can expand on, as they look at doing this kind of work in other places, and also in other circumstances that have some similarities to this circumstance of incarceration. So something that I've always thought about was, how expensive it is to keep people in prison. And I'm curious as to what Concordance has found in terms of the cost of reincarceration vis a vis the cost of a program like yours.



Rod Nunn 19:30

Yeah, that's a really great question, Omkari, something I think about a lot. Because when you put together a portfolio of services like ours that are addressing all the behavioral health components, all of the education, job readiness, employment components, all the community and life skill components, which by the way, we are clearing legal warrants too. We have a legal service to help them, it's nothing like getting out of prison and going right back to jail on some minor violation, right?



Rod Nunn 19:59

But those things cost money. So the cost per participant at Concordance annually is about \$12,000. And you might go, Wow, that's a lot of money. But the annual cost to house, someone in a state prison in our state and many other states, it's about \$24,000. All right. And so the earlier stat we talked about with individuals going back to prison, over 75%, going back within five years. When they go back, they go back on an average of like, for longer sentence like, so when you're going back repeatedly, so that compounds, so you're looking at the annual cost of \$24,000 versus \$12,000, we can keep them out. That \$24,000, you know, you know, you're saving that over multiple years. So it is definitely something that, you know, if you are a taxpayer, or if you are a policymaker, you're sort of looking at it through the lens of, wow, I mean, this is something that could really, really make a difference economically, for my state for my government.



Omkari Williams 21:04

Have you gotten a lot of buy in from the politicians in Missouri?



Rod Nunn 21:10

Absolutely. Absolutely. We have a lot of support from the State Department of Corrections. Obviously, we have a Memorandum of Understanding with them. But our legislators are great supporters of ours as well. Our end game in terms of where we want to be is we want this to be funded. Right now it's really financed by private donors in the philanthropic community, right. But, you know, our pitch to state government and policymakers is one of pay for performance because of what we just discussed and sort of the economic savings that would accrue to the state when we do our job well. We're saying, hey, if we can keep individuals out of prison, we're saving your correctional budget an exponential amount of money over the years, right, multiplied by numbers of individuals. And so we would like you to pay us when we perform well, and that has been received well in the state of Missouri. And we're starting to expand that message to other states like Illinois.



Omkari Williams 22:09

So how successful is this project? In terms of, let's say, 100 people come in? What percentage of those people actually go through the whole program and five years on have not reoffended?



Rod Nunn 22:28

That's a really good question. So our stated goal was to reduce reincarceration rates by a third. Now, I have to I have to pause and just tell you, like as a, as a practitioner, you know, coming in as an educator as one who's worked in workforce development, reduced by a third doesn't sound like a very difficult thing. But by definition, if you're only reducing something by a third, that means you're getting a lot of two thirds, like, on the other side, it sounds like a lot of bad news. But the researchers tell us that the most reduction that they've been able to see in a program like ours, I can't remember the exact number, but it wasn't any more than 20%, it was less than 20% reduction. So our stated goal is to reduce incarceration rates by a third, Omkari, for the last three, four years, we've been at 44%. Forty four percent.



Omkari Williams 23:25

Well, I think that getting that percentage is kind of amazing. I mean, and it gives me a lot of hope for what's possible as you all expand your work. So obviously, the biggest funding, the biggest challenge, rather, is funding. But beyond funding, what are the challenges that you are encountering as you do this work? What are the things that you feel like, are the obstacles you most want to overcome?



Rod Nunn 23:57

You know, I want to I want to make sure that the public at large understands this work in a more comprehensive way. For example, you know, there there's a stigma out there that if you've got a felony record, you can't possibly be someone who can perform well in the workplace, for example, and we know that not to be true. I mean, there are several research studies where we follow people over years in the workplace. One I'll mention quickly is a prominent sociologist. I think her name is Devah Pager out of Harvard.



Rod Nunn 24:33

She followed U.S. military employees from all branches of the military over six years and she looked at felons versus non felons and found out that felons over a period of six years were more likely to rise through the ranks of the military, no more or less likely to get terminated from their assignments. And even you know, we're moving you know, like I said, through the ranks of Sarge and and leadership positions. So I mean, there are lots of good data out there that proves contrary to some of the sort of commonly held assumptions that are myths for the population. But I think, you know, educating the public on the importance of this. I mean, we need to be investing into programs like this. And we know that, for example, most people don't realize this, most crimes are committed by individuals who have already been to prison when they get out. And so if we look at public safety, you know, there's no better way to reduce crime in a community than by focusing on reentry work in a comprehensive way, like we do. And that's what we learned from our police chiefs here in St. Louis, that this is something that was very promising in terms of public safety. So it's educating folks on those kinds of things.



Omkari Williams 25:47

Yeah. And, as always, education is a key to making significant and sustained changes. So in the few minutes that we have left, I want to just ask you, one thing that really feels important to me, and we've already discussed it by population, our incarceration rates are the highest in the developed world, and approximately 26% of those incarcerated in the

United States are mentally ill, as opposed to 5% of the general population. In what ways does your program address formerly incarcerated persons with mental health issues?

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Rod Nunn 26:33

Yeah, so that's a very, very important part of our model, in the behavioral health component is everything getting individuals on their healing journey. So we have licensed clinicians, so we have therapists who are coming alongside our individuals, our participants throughout their pre-release part of our program, and they stay alongside. So as folks are on their healing journey, as they're moving through, every one of our participants has a therapist, a case manager and a career coach as they're kind of progressing through.

R

Rod Nunn 27:02

So every step of the way, I think we did a calculation, which is incredible. And when you go through our program, you're getting about 520 hours of training and development and therapy over the 18 month program. That's more than any of us would have had in our baccalaureate degree education. Right. So yeah, our therapists are trained, they're licensed, they have the best tools and practice approaches that the profession has to offer, you know, to help individuals cope with with some of the mental health challenges that they face. And it's critical, critical to our program,



Omkari Williams 27:37

It seems to me that that must just be enormously reassuring to the people in the program to just know that, okay, I've got this team, and they're with me for this period of time. And just to have that backup feels like a very important thing. So before we go, I would like to ask you to do what I ask everyone to do, which is give the listeners three simple things that they can do to make a difference in this really important work.

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Rod Nunn 28:07

Thank you for the opportunity to do that, Omkari. I think the first thing I would share is that, you know, we need you to share the message in your circles of influence that individuals with criminal records, these justice involved adults that we're talking about, they do in fact, become good high performing employees in the workplace, solid, productive citizens. It is just true. It is something that is true, we see it every day, we see these miracles happen every day. So that's the first thing spread the message to anyone

who will listen. The second thing is stay informed with what's happening in public policy in your state, in your community. There are a lot of decisions that get made every legislative cycle that impacts individuals, you know, in your state. I would point you to the prison policy initiative as a great resource for that. That is www.prisonpolicy.org. And it will share with you everything that's going on in the various states on what good policy looks like, and you can become a part of that. And finally, I would encourage you to visit Concordanceacademy.org, to learn more about us. In particular our first chance campaign, which is a national campaign that is allowing us the ability to expand what we do and other places around the country. Our goal is to be in 10 cities by 2025. And you know, the message is getting out there with some of the finest you know, leaders and donors across the country. And we're excited about it.



Omkari Williams 29:38

As well you should be because this is amazing work that you're doing. And it's work that makes an immediate impact on the lives of the people you're engaged with and the people around them. So I'm very grateful that you're doing this work and I'm really, really happy that I had an opportunity to speak with you. This has been just wonderful.



Rod Nunn 30:01

Thank you so much, Omkari, for the opportunity and kudos to you for carrying the message, speaking truth to the community. I've listened to several of your episodes now and love what you do. I'm going to stay connected with you.



Omkari Williams 30:15

Thank you. That's really nice to hear. Thank you so much.



Omkari Williams 30:20

Reducing reincarceration rates isn't on most people's top five list of causes. But it's really important and has, as Rod has so eloquently shown us, real downstream consequences. If this speaks to you, please do one or more of the action items that Rod left us with. I'll post them on my website on Rod's podcast page. And yes, there is a lot of work to do. And yes, if we all do a small piece, we will make a disproportionate impact.



Omkari Williams 30:52

Thank you all for all that you do. Thank you for listening. I'll be back with another episode of Stepping Into Truth very soon. And until then, remember that change starts with story, so keep sharing yours.