

RICHARD: The U.S. has the highest rates of incarceration in the world. Once people get out of prison, the hope is they'll be productive members of society. But all too often, that doesn't happen. In this episode, we meet two men who want to fix America's flawed reentry process. This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Richard Davies.

ASHLEY: And I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte. Daren Swenson is a former prison warden who has spent his career in corrections. Georgetown University professor Marc Howard is a reformer who has long campaigned for the rights of incarcerated people. They were brought together by the policy resolution Convergence. You'll find out more about them later. At first, each man was nervous and a little wary of the other, but they actually have much more in common than they realized. Richard kicks us off.

RICHARD: Every year, hundreds of thousands of people are released from jails and prisons in this country, and at the current rate, about 4 in 10 former inmates are back again behind bars within three years. That's a very sad statistic that represents an enormous amount of failure and pain, doesn't it? Marc?

MARC: Absolutely. I think it's very troubling, and I think we all need to think about solutions to the problem. I think that the initial reaction that many people have is to blame the people themselves who wind up going back. Perhaps, in some cases, that's true, and I never want to take away a person's responsibility for a crime that's committed. But I also think that we need to think about the conditions of confinement so that when people are incarcerated, we can find better solutions that will help them succeed when they come home.

DAREN: Yeah, I would totally agree with Marc. I think that it's a very sad statistic that we're not achieving the outcomes that we're looking for to help people make a successful reentry when they're released from incarceration. And I think there's lots of opportunities for not only improvement in the way that we treat people but innovation and thinking about alternatives to incarceration.

MARC: And I think if we really care about public safety, about the costs of incarceration, which are staggering... the country spends \$85 billion a year on corrections... then we would realize that there are better ways of solving this problem so that, if we support people, if we give them opportunity, if we give them education, we give them work training, if we put them in a position where they have the support to succeed, they actually will succeed. There's a lot of evidence that shows that, and then they won't go back to prison, they won't commit other crimes, and it'll be, frankly, much more cost-effective to do so and more humane.

ASHLEY: We're going to talk about the Reentry Ready project that brought you two together in a minute, but before we do that, can each of you give us a sense of your backgrounds? Perhaps, Marc, we'll kick off with you again. Tell us a little bit about your background in prison and criminal justice reform.

MARC: Sure. Well, I came to it in a very roundabout way. I had a first career as a professor focusing on European politics, and I was teaching at Georgetown University, but I had a personal connection to this issue through my childhood friend, Marty Tankleff, who was wrongfully convicted of double murder, sentenced to life in prison. I got very involved in his case. I even went to law school in order to help him gain his freedom, and he was ultimately exonerated. And from that point on, I continued in this effort, became an attorney myself. I still teach at Georgetown, but I refocused everything I do in my research and teaching, which is involving prisons and getting people out of prison, and that includes wrongfully convicted people, but it also involves people who were guilty, who made mistakes because I think there are much better ways in which we can support them. So I've started education programs at Georgetown, and we offer several reentry programs for formerly incarcerated people.

ASHLEY: Daren, how about you?

DAREN: I came from a different perspective than Marc, being a 30-year practitioner in corrections. I've spent my entire career working in prisons starting as a front-line staff member and eventually becoming a warden at three different prisons and then moving on to regional oversight of multiple prisons. Worked that entire career with CoreCivic and have really enjoyed the opportunity to work with multiple government partners to help them tackle their challenges with corrections and incarceration in their state. Then I have evolved, in the last year, into a new role where I'm our Vice President of Reentry Partnerships and Innovation that is totally focused on opportunities that we can forge and things that we can be doing to improve the exact things that Marc talked about at the beginning of the discussion around human dignity, how we treat people, thinking more strategically about how to create those paths for successful reentry, and then thinking about innovations and ways that we can do things that can help not only improve the reentry process but also alternatives to incarceration and programs that are preventive even before people get involved in the justice system.

RICHARD: When you both began this process of working on the Reentry project, both of you came from very different perspectives. Was there any tension in the room? Daren?

DAREN: I think it's obvious that when you bring a group together to tackle a challenging social problem that have very wide perspectives and views on: what are the right solutions, and how can we best tackle this problem, I think there's just a natural little bit of sense of unease and a period of time that's necessary to get to know everybody and build some trust within the room so that we could have good open, honest conversations and be willing to hear and listen to others' perspectives. I think that was probably the way I came into it, especially as a practitioner and coming into a room... There were two other corrections professionals that did this every day that work with the justice-involved population, and the rest of the room of 15 or 20 other people were all people that were either working in policy organizations or came from

academia like Marc. So I think coming into a room where you're one of the people that are actually out there doing the work, it was a little bit intimidating and took some time to settle in and to understand how we could come together to tackle this problem.

RICHARD: Daren, you came from the private sector. Marc, you had a very different perspective on prisons. Were you a little bit suspicious of Daren.

MARC: Well, I was certainly suspicious, I think, of anyone in corrections at that point in my career, in my journey in this domain because I came from a perspective that was really very focused on the rights of incarcerated people or the lack of them and a lot of the indignities that they face. So I felt that I was a defender of incarcerated people, and coming from that perspective, I had a strong view, you might say strident view, which I no longer have now, and Daren has really helped me reshape that, that people working in corrections were the enemy, were the problem. And through the Convergence process and through our getting to know each other, I really came to understand the challenges of corrections, particularly of running facilities, and also the good faith of many people, especially Daren and the people he works with, for finding good solutions. We actually have a lot more in common than we realized. The very first meeting, we were actually seated next to each other for dinner, which, it turns out, was intentional. I didn't realize that, but it went very well, and I think it started a process that's been really influential for both of us.

ASHLEY: Yeah, Daren, how did you feel going in? Tell us a little bit more about... were you nervous, uncomfortable?

DAREN: Yeah. I think it was a little bit of mix of all that, Ashley. I think that any time you're going into a room, as a practitioner, over time, I had some of the equal feelings about people coming from Marc's perspective, that they really don't understand what we do every day and that, to some people, it feels like it's so simple that we can just do A, B, C and D, and we can fix these problems. But I really enjoyed Marc, right away, being open to listen to what those challenges were and saying, "Hey, I've been in prisons. I've toured prisons." And I think also the ability that I had to say to Marc right away, "Hey, I'd love to have you come and tour one of our facilities. Let's go see one together. I'd like to hear your perspective on what we're doing, how we're doing things," and immediately saying that I was open to hearing the things that Marc might have suggestions of how we could do things differently really helped start that relationship between Marc and I. And I've really respected his approach and the way he's done things, and he's given me lots of things to think about that has helped me in my new role. So I really appreciate that.

RICHARD: Tell us more about that. What happened?

DAREN: Well, I think that Marc immediately helped me think about, when we've toured facilities, pointed out things about how staff are interacting with the residents in the facility, talked about our educational programming, how we might be able to do things

differently. Marc has been open to invite me to come to his Pivot program with folks that are being released and his Entrepreneur program and give me access to people who were formerly incarcerated to have just open conversations and really hearing from the people who are most being impacted by the system and being more open to hearing their perspective, the influence that we're having as they go through their journey of incarceration. Marc has really helped open my eyes to that.

MARC: From my perspective, there were some key steps. A big one that Daren mentioned was when he came to speak to the Pivot program at Georgetown, and I have to admit I had a little bit of trepidation because here, we're having somebody who has a career in corrections, who was a warden at three facilities, who's a senior executive at CoreCivic coming to speak to a group of formerly incarcerated people who have been recently released, and it turns out at least one of them had been incarcerated in a CoreCivic facility where Daren had worked. So I was worried that this could turn into almost a standoff or a big, heated exchange, and I was really impressed by how Daren handled it. There was mutual respect, and at the end, there was great appreciation for what he had to offer, and I think it opened everybody's eyes in a new way, including mine.

ASHLEY: Can I just ask, Daren, because we've heard about Marc's background and this really interesting way that he got into this work. Why did you go into your work?

DAREN: Well, I think it was a little bit of... quite frankly, I don't think many people, when you have career day, come in and ask, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" people say a correctional officer. That's really unfortunate because the more we can attract the right people into the career, the better chance we have to achieve the right environment of human dignity and the way we want to treat people and get better outcomes. But I say all that to say I didn't initially start off my career wanting to get into corrections. I started off my career while I was in college thinking that I was interested in federal law enforcement and maybe even probation, something on that side of the criminal justice system. But I had a college advisor that said he had an internship at a halfway house, and I took the internship at the halfway house, and 30-plus years later, I'm still involved in the corrections side of helping people while they're incarcerated.

RICHARD: We're talking about reentry, but your industry, Daren, which calls itself corrections, is it too often involved in punishment and control rather than corrections, rather than helping inmates and eventually helping them to lead successful lives when they leave prisons and jails?

DAREN: Yeah, I think that's somewhat of a misnomer in the sense that, yes, we are responsible for safety and security, and yes, there are rules that we have to have within a facility to maintain order and control. But I really think it's a philosophy and how you approach running your facility. One of the main keys that I've found and luckily had mentors early in my career, was that to have good safety and control and order in a facility, the best way to achieve that is treat people with respect, create the human

connection with people, create the opportunities for them to have programming to do things, and then you won't have as many issues with the control and the order in the facility. Over the years, there's been a shift in how programming has been offered in facilities, and there's been shifts back and forth between what some people might call warehousing of people and not offering programming and just a period of incarceration to eliminate them from being in society. But I think we're in a real opportunity right now over the last 10 or 15 years to really look at differently because if all you do is punish and control, you're never going to have a positive impact on the recidivism outcomes.

ASHLEY: Marc, what was it like when you met Daren at that first Convergence event. Did you get on well right away, or was there a gradual defrosting?

MARC: Well, there was a definite gradual defrosting. It's not like suddenly we started dancing or something. It was a process, breaking bread, talking over dinner, sometimes small talk, sometimes about the issues and having a very pleasant, enjoyable conversation. Over the course of the next few meetings, because I believe there were five, maybe six meetings that we had through Convergence, we continued the conversation, and it was cordial, but then it became much more about the substance. There was another time where Daren came to D.C. and we got together for coffee or lunch. It was a process, I would say. It wasn't an instant transformation for either one of us, but there was a process of building mutual respect. And I want to say, on the question of prison conditions that Richard brought up, I'm relentless in my defense of the rights of incarcerated people who are, I think, too rarely afforded opportunities for personal freedom, for growth, for safety, even, and I'm always pointing out, and I did this in a book I wrote, *Unusually Cruel*, that we don't live up to standards that we should in this country. But what's interesting is that, while delivering that message, you might think that Daren would sort of put his fists up or be defensive and we'd go at, but I was impressed by his acknowledgement of that and his desire to change that. That led me to think I should be working with the people who actually can make those changes, which is people in corrections rather than just sit on the sidelines and yell and criticize.

RICHARD: How did your daughter play into this story of you two becoming friends?

MARC: I believe it would've been in the fall of 2017. I can't remember, sometime during that academic year. My daughter was visiting colleges in her junior year of high school. She was a highly recruited athlete, and one of the schools we were looking at was Vanderbilt University, which is in Nashville. So I reached out to Daren, let him know that we were going to be coming, and said, "Maybe this is an opportunity to visit the prison, but I'll also be with my daughter who's 16 and who happens to have an interest in this work through our many conversations about it." I said, "Would it be possible to have her join us on this visit?" The timing was such we'd be coming straight from the airport going to the prison. And Daren found a way to make it happen, and we had a really positive experience, on that, for my daughter, was very formative and influential. Also, for me, I got to see Daren inside, so not just in meetings over nice meals and so

on in Washington, not just speaking to the Pivot program in Georgetown as a guest of mine, but then as a senior executive in the facility where he has a leadership role. It was wonderful to see how he interacted, the respect... You might notice Daren uses the word "residents." Richard, you've been using the word "inmates," I've noticed. That word, from people on the inside, is really negatively received. It's viewed as very dehumanizing, very pejorative. I'm not saying this to criticize you, Richard. It's a process, I think, that all of us in society and those in journalism are working through to try to use more humanizing language, but residents is a term that has really become more accepted. Not many people in corrections use I yet, but Daren has been a leader in that regard, too, and it's something I got to see, not only that he uses the word but actually how he treats people, which is not as inmates but as human beings, and that's really important.

RICHARD: I stand corrected, but I think that, in overall use, outside of the prison community, inmates is still broadly used.

MARC: Unfortunately, that's the case, but I'm hoping that will be continuing to change.

RICHARD: Marc Howard and Daren Swenson on Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Richard.

ASHLEY: And I'm Ashley. This podcast comes to you from Common Ground Committee, and we have a lot going on in addition to this show. Join other Common Grounders. Go to our website, [comongroundcommittee.org](http://comongroundcommittee.org) and sign up for our newsletter, where you'll be kept in the loop about all things common ground.

RICHARD: And our YouTube channel has all of our podcasts and live event content, as well. Last but not least, Common Ground Committee is a nonprofit. Please consider a donation. It's easy. Just hit the Donate tab on the website. Now back to our interview with Marc Howard and Daren Swenson.

ASHLEY: What are some of the main findings of the project? How do you prepare prisoners for reentry, residents for reentry into the workforce and into family life?

MARC: Well, there's this saying, and I think it's very true, which is that, "Reentry begins on the first day of incarceration." It can be an empty slogan, but I think it's really important, and I think that was one of the guiding principles of the group, was that we need to think about, from day one, how to work on and develop solutions that will lead to successful outcomes, which is people, when they do come home, and we can't control when they come home... that's through a judicial process. That's completely separate. But in terms of who's incarcerated and what happens and their trajectory and hopefully not coming back to prison after they leave, we worked on and talked about different solutions that would lead to better outcomes. The big one, certainly that I was emphasizing and that I think came out in a lot of our conversations, was programming and support, which includes education and job training but also

includes mental health support and just general wellbeing that will make it so that when people leave, they're in a better place than when they came in.

DAREN: I couldn't agree with you more, Marc, about reentry starting on day one. We actually have a living model within our organization, and we train our staff from day one that everybody is a reentry professional no matter what your role as not just our security staff or our programming staff or our educational staff. It doesn't matter who you are and what role you play in our organization, that your first and foremost job is to be a reentry professional because something that you're doing in your role within our organization can somehow be tied back to helping somebody think about how they can be better and how they can be prepared for release. The one example I would use with that is that even if you are a maintenance worker in the facility and you have residents assigned to a crew to work with you, you're modeling the employer/employee relationship for that resident. When he's working for someone as a manager and as a supervisor, they're learning skills. They're learning how to interact with other coworkers if they're a four or five-person crew that may be working with that maintenance worker. So it's really breaking down for staff to understand that the work that they're doing is really critical to teaching life skills and teaching basic elements of respect and how people can develop those skills that they may not have had that may have led to their incarceration or things that they've just never been taught or exposed to, maybe have never had a mentor, maybe never had a supervisor or a manager who's explained to them how to be a good employee.

RICHARD: Back to the Convergence process, Daren, how else did it help you rethink the way you do things?

DAREN: One of the big takeaways for me from the Convergence process was: what can we do as corrections practitioners to really try to start to attack the silos that are out there between agencies, and how do we start to do a better job of sharing data and information across agencies that are all going to be key to somebody's reentry? So whether that be the ability to have an electronic medical record that can transfer with that person into a community to a community provider for good continuity of care, whether that be... the same thing within that medical record would be their mental health treatment to transfer to a mental health provider, whether that's helping them actually have a resume from the type of work that I'm talking about where they worked on a maintenance crew within the facility to be able to take that to an employer. How do you transition those things out?

RICHARD: Daren, you mentioned this word, "agencies." Do you mean state, federal, local government agencies as well as the private sector, or mostly government here?

DAREN: Yeah, I think it's mostly Department of Health, Department of Human Services. It's HUD. It's all the things that impact somebody's ability to get medical treatment, housing, employment. It's bringing all those folks to the table to talk about: what are the things that each one of those agencies owns and is responsible for and

can make decisions about that person? And how can we help them think about things that are creating barriers for people who are formerly incarcerated and trying to reenter based on rules and things that have been set within their agency.

RICHARD: One of the Convergence project's most striking recommendations is to urge corrections officials to develop individualized reentry plans for residents. What are they, and how can these plans be helpful? Marc, can you first address that?

MARC: Sure. Let me just give an example following on what Daren just said. If a person who has mental health challenges or addiction history and is on medication that is helping that person, then gets released, but upon release, there's a gap of a week before something can eventually kick in or the person's just left on their own to figure out how to get that medication that they've been on. They may go through withdrawal. They may have the problems that the medication's helping come back. And then that person slips and uses drugs or robs someone to buy drugs or has a mental health breakdown of sorts, and then that person goes back to prison. Whose fault is that? Because I think, up until now, we've said that person is a career criminal or addict or so on. But I think what this larger perspective helps to show us is that we failed that person when that happens because there could've been a much better outcome, and you multiply that by hundreds of thousands of people. Then you think about the costs involved. This is where the budget point comes in, is that then it's costing roughly between \$30,000 and \$60,000 a year, depending on the location, to keep somebody in prison. So the integration that Daren was talking about across agencies is so critical because if they just are silos, which really has been the case and still is the case, then they're just looking at their own budgets, and they're trying to fight for their own budgets in their little fiefdoms, essentially, the directors of these agencies. But if they start working together, they're actually going to bring the overall cost down significantly and have better outcomes for people and bring down costs and reduce crime.

DAREN: Yeah, everything Marc said plus, I think, from a practitioner, the importance of the individualized plan for each person is that everybody has unique circumstances. I know that sounds a little bit elementary to say that it's individualized because everybody's unique, but as people are released, some people are releasing out into the community, and they have a strong family support system that's waiting for them to come back. They have a place to live. They have a great opportunity for a job already lined up, and they have this great support network around them. But even those people may have a spot where they don't have the right access to their treatment. They might not have access to the right mental health provider. So you really have to dig into each individual person's situation and circumstances to understand what are their risks, and what are their needs so that you can best customize that plan in a way, to Marc's point, that is not only most cost-effective but also gives them the best chance for success because if you just throw the kitchen sink at everybody and hope for the best, we get what we're getting today.



ASHLEY: Daren, Marc, and the other stakeholders made a lot of progress during the months they were meeting through Convergence. Daren says one of their colleagues, Rhett Covington, of the Department of Public Safety and Corrections in Louisiana is just one example of someone who's pushing things forward.

DAREN: I think that there's some really good things happening. I know Rhett Covington in Louisiana, that was part of the group, has taken a lot of the takeaways from the actual model and is working on a pilot project to take several of the recommendations from the Convergence outcomes and from the Reentry Ready project and is trying to apply them. I know they've went through the planning stages and the processes, and they got the funding, and they're getting ready to kick that pilot off down in Louisiana. And several of us that were on the project are still in contact with Rhett and following that process, and I think it'll be really interesting to see what some of the outcomes and data that come out of that are. I'm really excited for Rhett and hopeful that he can bring that to the table. Then, I think, also, there's been great outcomes such as the work that Marc and I have been able to do together with the Frederick Douglass Project. So I think, for me, that's been one of the best takeaways from the whole process, has been relationships that I've developed with people from very wide-ranging perspectives and getting the opportunity for us to think about innovative ways that... We may not be able to turn the Titanic in a year or two years based on our recommendations, but we can all work together through our various resources and networks to be able to take these recommendations and be able to influence people to think about how they can either fund them or think about changing policies or doing things that can start to make these changes. But really excited about the project that Marc and I working on together with the Frederick Douglass Project, which was Marc's concept. And, Mark, I'd love to turn it over to you to talk a little bit about that.

MARC: Yeah. Thank you, Daren. The work that I've been doing that Daren alluded to is I founded an organization, the Frederick Douglass Project for Justice, which has, as its goal, to humanize incarcerated people through in-person and sometimes virtual visits where outside people get to connect with the humanity of incarcerated people because, just as we talked about the visit that my daughter and I did in the facility in Nashville that Daren helped facilitate, I've also, myself, been in dozens and dozens of prisons around the country, and I've brought in, at this point, over 1,000 visitors to come inside through my Georgetown programs in particular. Every time, the person has walked out and said that was an extraordinary and often life-changing experience where they realize that there actually are good people there, good people who have made mistakes but who are trying to find a better path and that if we see their humanity and we care about them in a new way, we'll actually be, as a society, much more supportive of successful reentry. So, even though it's about bringing people into prisons, the outcome was really about reentry. And I've been really happy that Daren, through one of the CoreCivic facilities in Colorado, Bent County Correctional Facility, has become our first partner where we've been facilitating visits both in-person and virtual. But at Core, what we're trying to do is help society overall realize that there's tremendous humanity, and by that, I mean people with

talent, people with character, people who have families, who have stories, who have hopes, who have dreams, who deserve to be supported and recognized as human beings, which really hasn't been the case for so many decades in this country. And I think we're part of, as Daren said, turning that Titanic, and this dimension of it is really important. I've been appreciative that our friendship has also turned into this partnership that has really been very helpful for the Frederick Douglass Project as we launched.

ASHLEY: Thank you. Thank you both so much for coming on Let's Find Common Ground.

RICHARD: Yes, thank you.

MARC: Thank you for having us.

ASHLEY: Marc Howard and Daren Swenson on Let's Find Common Ground.

RICHARD: We've produced this podcast in partnership with the policy group Convergence. Learn more about their work at [convergencepolicy.org](http://convergencepolicy.org). I'm Richard Davies.

ASHLEY: And I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte. Thanks for listening.

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