



Between the Bars is a paper based blogging platform for the 2.5 million Americans who are incarcerated. We receive hand written blog posts from writers in prison, scan them, and post them online to the authors' individual blogs. Just like any other blogging platform, visitors can leave comments, which we then print and mail back to the writer in prison.

An increasingly large portion of the United States population – 1% of the adult population – is now in prison. The US is alone in this cultural position; it has more prisoners than any other country in the world. Incarceration disproportionately affects poor and minorities – a full 1 in 3 black men will be incarcerated at some point in their life. Families with incarcerated members face the triple burden of lost income during incarceration, lost time in job skill development and experience, and reduced opportunities for civic participation. Many employers refuse to hire people with records, and those who have been incarcerated face dramatically reduced long-term earning potential. Against these structurally punishing conditions, it is no wonder that recidivism rates in this country are so shockingly high. As a system intended to make us safer, prisons in the US are a failure by any measure.

Changing our approach to incarceration is no trivial matter. Governments have little incentive to enact reform for fear of appearing “soft on crime”, and the stigmatization of those who have been incarcerated creates a deep class rift that is difficult to overcome. What is needed is no less than a cultural transformation in how we react to crime. Transformation of this type is impossible as long as incarcerated populations remain a cultural blind spot. We can begin this transformation by establishing a public dialog with people in prison, in a manner that respects them as humans, citizens, and individuals.

Prison policies, however, are structurally stacked against the possibility of dialog. Visitation can be expensive for families whose loved ones are incarcerated hundreds of miles from home. Prison phone systems are usually operated by monopolies which charge extortionate rates for even short local calls. The US mail is currently the most accessible and cost-effective means of communication, but it is increasingly alienating for an Internet generation that never writes letters, and a prison population that is denied basic access to the Internet.

Between the Bars seeks to overcome this by providing people in prison with access to a broadcast medium through paper mail. Family members and any other visitors can engage in discussion with the writers by leaving comments on their blogs. While it has always been possible for people in prison to blog by sending letters to friends or family who could transcribe the letters and post them to the Internet, this has only been available to those who already had strong connections to tech-savvy people with a lot of free time. Between the Bars provides this opportunity to anyone who can write a letter, and educates writers in prison on how to blog effectively. We believe that this approach can begin to chip away at the systematic “othering” and stigmatization that people who have been



incarcerated face. By bringing about awareness through dialogue, we believe that we can improve conditions both inside and outside of prison, and make our communities safer.



Between the Bars currently has 327 enrolled writers in prison who have written over 2400 blog posts, with replies from 335 active commenters. We currently have a waitlist of over 700 writers who are interested in blogging, whom we are gradually enrolling as we add capacity. Our main constraint to growth is currently the amount of time it takes to open and scan mail – we are currently operating with a single staff person at 20 hours per week, with additional contributions from a small team of core

volunteers. In order to grow our capacity, we have recently rewritten the back-end software to support multiple organizations and volunteers representing their own writers.

Some of our ambitions for growth which are in progress include:

- **Federation:** Developing partnerships with other prisoner support organizations to amplify their constituents' voices. We hope to use these partnerships to cut into our 700-person waitlist.
- **Reach:** Increasing the accessibility of writing from people in prison through editorial promotion, improved categorization and tagging, and integration with other social media outlets.
- **Participation:** Increasing the participation from volunteers outside of prison, and the role of people in prison as co-directors of our efforts. We're developing more refined tools for volunteer engagement on both sides of the bars.

We believe that even in the face of civic exclusion, the power of the Internet can be leveraged to organize a shift in consciousness that will improve the lives of the millions of people in this country who are impacted by this universally harmful system. Our aim is to combine our technical skill with the wealth of community organizing that is already working in this space to make a significant impact.

Visit us on the web: <http://betweenthebars.org>