



Returning Home: Exploring the Challenges and Successes of Recently Released Texas Prisoners



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Returning Home: Understanding the Challenges of Prisoner Reentry is a longitudinal study of prisoner reentry in Maryland, Illinois, Ohio, and Texas under the direction of Dr. Christy Visher, principal research associate at the Urban Institute. The study explores (1) the individual reentry experience through interviews with prisoners before and after release from prison; (2) the family perspective on reentry from interviews with family members of returning prisoners; and (3) the community context of reentry based on interviews with key community stakeholders and focus groups with residents.

The JEHT Foundation, the Houston Endowment, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) support *Returning Home-Texas*. NuStats, Incorporated, an Austin-based research firm, conducted the original data collection under the supervision of Robert Santos.

This policy brief offers a preview of findings from a forthcoming research report on the experiences of former prisoners in the first year after their return to Houston area communities. To learn more about *Returning Home* and to read research reports and briefs, please visit our web site: www.urban.org/justice.

Any opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Urban Institute, its board, or its sponsors.

This research brief presents highlights from a study of prisoner reentry in Texas. Its purpose is to inform state-level decisionmakers about how to allocate scarce correctional resources to yield the best outcomes for people released from prison and state jail and to increase the safety of the communities to which they return. Our findings indicate that those who participate in job training, educational programs, and substance abuse treatment while incarcerated have better reentry outcomes and are less likely to return to prison. However, large shares of prisoners—particularly those housed in state jails¹—do not have access to these programs and services.

OVERVIEW OF PRISONERS RETURNING TO HOUSTON

In 2004, over 14,000 prisoners were released to Houston area communities,² with roughly half (49 percent) exiting from state prison and the remainder (51 percent) from state jail. The characteristics of these two groups differ in several important ways. State prisoners serve much longer sentences³ and are more likely to be male and to be incarcerated for violent offenses. State jail confinees are more likely to be drug offenders, have fewer prior incarcerations on average, and are older at the time of first arrest.⁴

PROGRAM PARTICIPATION

Key Findings⁵: Prisoners who participate in job training and educational programs while incarcerated are less likely to return to prison after release.⁶

State jail confinees are less likely than state prisoners to participate in educational, job training and other self-betterment programs.

- Roughly two-thirds (68 percent) of state prisoners and half (45 percent) of state jail confinees participate in educational or employment programs while incarcerated.
- Fifty-nine percent of state prisoners and 49 percent of state jail confinees take part in prerelease transitional programs.
- Forty-one percent of state prisoners and 27 percent of state jail confinees participate in counseling, anger management, violence prevention, or cognitive behavioral programs.

EMPLOYMENT

Key Findings: Persons with stable employment after release from prison and state jail are less likely to be reincarcerated within 12 months.⁷

State prisoners have greater employment success after release than do state jail confinees.

- Seventy percent of state prisoners are employed after release,⁸ compared with 42 percent of state jail confinees.
- Those with jobs lined up before release work more consistently (90 percent of the time since release) than those who do not have jobs lined up (50 percent of the time).
- State prisoners are more likely than state jail confinees to have a job lined up before release (15 versus 8 percent).

SUBSTANCE USE

Key Findings: Those with preprison substance use histories are three times more likely to return to prison or state jail.⁹ However, those who participate in intensive substance abuse treatment while incarcerated are less likely to use drugs after release.¹⁰

State jail confinees have more severe substance use histories and less access to treatment; consequently, they are at greater risk of relapse.

- State jail confinees are more likely to report frequent preprison drug use (68 percent) than state prisoners (50 percent) and are more likely to have substance abuse problems¹¹ (82 versus 71 percent) prior to incarceration.
- Approximately a third (34 percent) of state prisoners with substance abuse problems receive treatment while incarcerated, yet only 6 percent of state jail confinees do.
- Those with histories of preprison substance abuse are no more likely than others to receive substance abuse treatment while incarcerated.

SUPERVISION AND RECIDIVISM

Key Findings: Among state prisoners,¹² postrelease supervision is linked with greater access to community-based substance abuse treatment. Supervision, however, also contributes to reincarceration rates.

- Those under supervision are three times more likely to receive substance abuse treatment in the community (49 versus 16 percent).
- Of supervisees who return to TDCJ custody within a year after release, over half (56 percent) are returned for technical violations.

DISCUSSION

Texas prisoners and state jail confinees who have access to educational, employment, and substance abuse treatment programs while incarcerated can benefit greatly. These programs aid former prisoners in finding and retaining jobs, reduce the likelihood of postrelease drug use and intoxication, and increase the odds that they will remain crime free and in the community. These findings suggest that increasing access to treatment and programs can contribute to community safety and may ultimately reduce the need for more prison beds.

Parole and mandatory supervision also yield promising results in linking former prisoners to substance abuse treatment in the community. However, given that half of state prisoners' reincarcerations are for supervision violations rather than new crimes, TDCJ should review its policies to seek lower-cost, community-based

sanctions for violators of parole and mandatory supervision.

State legislators and criminal justice officials should also focus more attention on the needs of state jail confinees, who have more extensive histories of substance use, have less access to programs and treatment, and are more likely to be reincarcerated. Encouraging judges to impose split sentences, with state jail confinement followed by probation, may yield the same benefits that supervised parolees experience regarding access to treatment and services in the community.

¹ In 1995, a new sentencing category for Class A misdemeanants and third-degree felons took effect. These "state jail confinees" are sentenced to community-based, state-operated facilities for a term of 75 days to two years. Given the differences between those housed in state jail versus those in state prisons, statistics in this research brief are reported separately for these two populations.

² Estimate based number of releasees convicted in Harris County.

³ The median time served is 32 months for state prisoners and 6 months for state jail confinees.

⁴ The median age at release and racial makeup are similar for the two populations.

⁵ Key findings are based on multivariate regression analyses and reflect statistical significance at $p < .05$.

⁶ Eight percent of participants in job training and educational programs and 14 percent of nonparticipants returned to TDCJ custody within 12 months.

⁷ Those who avoided reincarceration were employed 53 percent of the time during the first six months after release, while those who were reincarcerated spent 32 percent of that time working.

⁸ At the time of the second postrelease interview, between 8 and 10 months following release.

⁹ The 12-month reincarceration rate is 13 percent among those who used drugs frequently before the most recent prison or state jail term, and 4 percent among those who did not.

¹⁰ Four percent of treated report frequent post-prison drug use, compared with 20 percent of those who did not receive treatment.

¹¹ Based on frequent drug and alcohol use and related difficulties.

¹² The vast majority of state prisoners are subject to community supervision, most often parole supervision; state jail confinees have no reporting or program requirements after release.

Methodology

The Texas Returning Home study entailed three waves of interviews with male and female prisoners returning to the Houston area. The first survey was administered just prior to release (N = 676), and the second two surveys were administered at two to four months after release (N = 509) and 8 and 10 months after release (N = 378), respectively. Study participants who were reincarcerated in state or local correctional institutions during the study remained in the study and were interviewed while in confinement. The findings presented in this research brief are based on analyses of the responses of only those who participated in the prerelease survey and both waves of postrelease interviews (N = 352). No significant differences were found between this subset and the larger sample based on age, time served, or release type. However, respondents to all three waves were less likely to be white and to have committed a drug possession offense, more likely to have been incarcerated for a violent or drug distribution offense, and had served slightly longer prison terms than those who only participated in the first interview.