



# Illinois Prisoners' Reentry Success Three Years after Release



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## KEY FINDINGS

- Three years after release, 59 percent of former Illinois prisoners in the sample were reincarcerated—up from 34 percent at 16 months out.
- Those successful at reentry (at avoiding reincarceration three years out) were older first-time releases. They also reported no illegal income or family violence prior to prison.
- Postprison predictors of reentry success included finding employment and housing after release, reintegrating into a new and less disorganized neighborhood, avoiding antisocial peers, and having a physical and/or mental health condition (which may have restricted activity outside the home).

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*To learn more about *Returning Home* and prisoner reentry, please visit our web site: [www.urban.org/justice](http://www.urban.org/justice).*

Every year, more than 600,000 offenders are released from prisons nationwide.<sup>1</sup> Most are men and many have extensive criminal backgrounds. However difficult their chances in life before incarceration, they are even more difficult after release. Many will struggle to find employment and housing, avoid substance use and criminal activity, and reintegrate into their communities.

Yet despite great odds, some former prisoners—nearly a third according to Bureau of Justice Statistics data—successfully avoid rearrest, reconviction, and reincarceration for at least three years following their release from prison.<sup>2</sup> Who are these men? What helped them to succeed? And, how can knowledge of their life stories help others in similar predicaments?

These questions are the focus of this brief, which documents the lives of 145 men released from Illinois prisons from 2002 to 2003 and tracked for three years afterwards—through personal interviews and official reincarceration records as part of the multistate longitudinal study *Returning Home: Understanding the Challenges of Prisoner Reentry* (see sidebar, next page).<sup>3</sup> The sample may be small and state-specific, but the challenges the men report facing are not new; rather, they parallel those found in other states, such as Maryland, Ohio, and Texas.<sup>4</sup> The difference in the *Returning Home Illinois* study is the extensive length of time over which men were followed: reincarceration records cover three years after prison while interviews were conducted 30 days before release and 2, 7, and 16 months after release. This longitudinal accounting of prisoners' reentry experiences allows us to examine, for the first time, what factors distinguish individuals who succeed three years out of prison from those who do not.

## ORGANIZATION OF THE BRIEF

This research brief uses graphs to tell the stories of former prisoners in Illinois. Some show percentages of men experiencing different issues, such as employment success, substance use relapse, and involvement in family relationships. Others show scores across all men on scales measuring domains such as self-esteem and control over life, family relationship quality, and reintegration difficulties. Wherever interview data are available—before release or 2, 7, or 16 months after release—those numbers are presented. Graph by graph, we tell a story of Illinois prisoners' experiences just before and up to three years after their release from incarceration.

We also highlight throughout the brief factors we found to be predictive of reentry success based on the results of multivariate regression analyses predicting who successfully avoided reincarceration three years out. We focus on distinguishing the characteristics and experiences of men who avoided reincarceration, both for the first 16 months out and for all three years after release, from those of men who did not. Lastly, we identify several policy implications of the study.

## THE RETURNING HOME STUDY

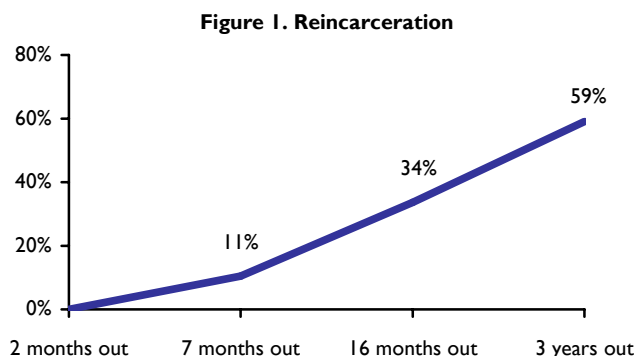
Launched in 2001 and completed in June 2006, the multistate *Returning Home* study explored the pathways of prisoner reintegration, examining which factors contributed to successful (or unsuccessful) reentry and identifying how those factors could inform policy. The study targeted male prisoners serving at least one year in state prisons<sup>5</sup> and returning to the areas of Chicago, Illinois; Cleveland, Ohio; and Houston, Texas. The data collected included measures of both reintegration (e.g., family support, employment, substance use) and recidivism (e.g., reincarceration).

In Illinois, study samples were recruited from 2002 to 2003 through the use of a preexisting prerelease program in which groups of prisoners were already convened. During these sessions, *Returning Home* interviewers held orientations explaining the study and distributed self-administered surveys to those willing to participate. These prerelease questionnaires were designed to capture respondents' experiences immediately before and during their incarceration. After release, three in-person interviews captured respondents' postrelease experiences approximately 2, 7, and 16 months following release.

Of the 400 respondents who completed the prerelease interview, 36 percent (N=145) completed all three post-release interviews. These 145 men are the focus of this brief. Inverse probability weighting (IPW) was used to statistically correct for attrition bias. Increasingly popular among economists and statisticians, IPW methods provide an intuitive approach to correcting for non-representation by weighting sample members by the inverse probability of their being selected. In this way, IPW methods can be used to correct general forms of sample selection, attrition, and stratification problems.<sup>6</sup> For more on study recruitment and participation, see La Vigne, Nancy G., Christy Visser, and Jennifer Castro. (2004). *Chicago Prisoners' Experiences Returning Home*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.

## REENTRY SUCCESS THREE YEARS OUT

Three years after release from prison, Illinois Department of Corrections records indicate that 4 out of 10 men in the sample had successfully avoided reincarceration (figure 1). Conversely, 59 percent had been reincarcerated for a new crime conviction or parole violation within three years of their release.<sup>7</sup>



Reincarceration rates increased fairly rapidly the first year and a half after release, slowing slightly afterward. One-tenth (11 percent) of the men had been reincarcerated by 7 months out, a share that had tripled only 9 months later. By 16 months out, 34 percent of the men had been returned to an Illinois state prison.

Using reincarceration (un-)likelihood as the marker of reentry success, we identified several factors predictive of reentry success at 16 months and three years after release. Significant ( $p < .10$ ) predictors included respondent's age and criminal history, postprison employment, housing, neighborhood characteristics, physical and mental health, and family and peer relationships. Each domain is discussed below as we describe the characteristics and experiences of the 145 men before, during, and up to 16 months after incarceration.

## DEMOGRAPHICS AND CRIMINAL HISTORY

At the time of their release, respondents were 35 years old on average and less than half (43 percent) had graduated from high school or obtained their GED. Most (68 percent) had been incarcerated at least once previously and for their current sentence, respondents had served an average of 19 months. The current offense—for nearly half—was drug-related (44 percent), although a third (33 percent) were serving time for a property offense, and a fifth (21 percent) for a violent offense. Nearly two-thirds (60%) reported illegal income in the six months before their incarceration.

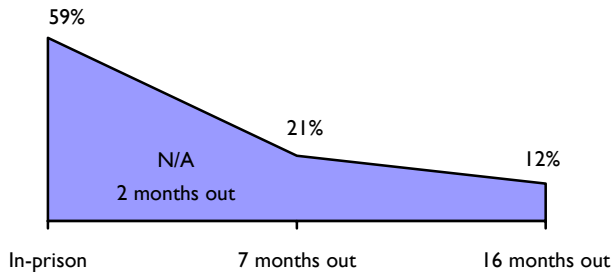
Older respondents and those with no prior incarcerations were better able to avoid reincarceration for the entire three-year postrelease period. Predicted probabilities of reincarceration were 55 percent for those 30 and older compared with 68 percent for those under 30; and 51 percent for those who had not been incarcerated before, compared with 63 percent for those who had been.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, respondents who were less criminally involved before their present incarceration (i.e., those who reported no illegal income before prison) were more successful at avoiding reincarceration 16 months after release. Predicted probabilities were 22 percent for those with no prior illegal income, compared with 42 percent for those reporting at least some.

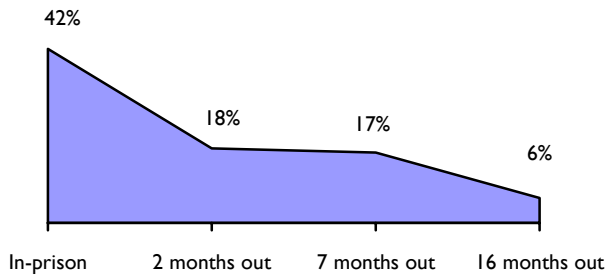
## EMPLOYMENT AND SUBSTANCE USE

Substantial shares of respondents participated in education/employment programs (59 percent) or received substance abuse programming (42 percent) while incarcerated, but after release, these shares dropped to a fifth or less (figures 2 and 3). By 16 months out, only 12 percent had participated in an education/employment program and 6 percent in a substance abuse program, including Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Narcotics Anonymous (NA).

**Figure 2. Education/Employment Program Participation**



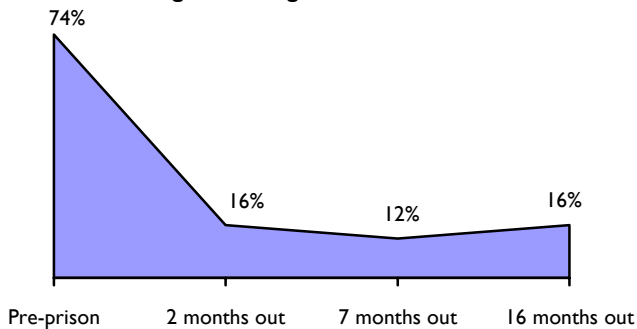
**Figure 3. Substance Abuse Program Participation**



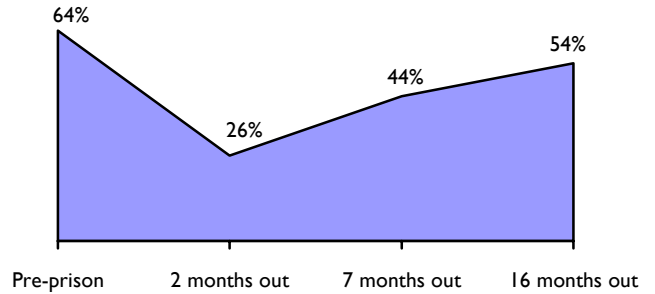
This drop in substance abuse programming participation may not be as problematic as it appears; by 16 months out, respondents continued to report relatively low rates of drug or alcohol use or intoxication (16 percent) (figure 4). However, unemployment rates after release were not comparably low. Almost half of the sample (46 percent) remained unemployed at 16 months out—meaning a fairly large number of former prisoners could have benefited from additional education or employment training in the community during this time (figure 5).

Importantly, respondents who were employed 16 months after release were less likely to have returned to prison three years out. Predicted probabilities of reincarceration were 51 percent for those who had worked at least one week compared with 69 percent for those who had not.<sup>9</sup>

**Figure 4. Drug Use or Intoxication**



**Figure 5. Employed at Least One Week**

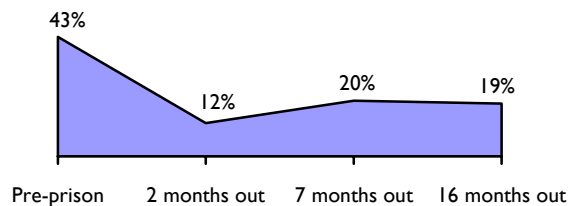


## HOUSING AND NEIGHBORHOODS

Before prison, almost half (43 percent) of the respondents lived in their own place, while the remainder depended on family or friends for housing (figure 6). Understandably, very few were able to live on their own soon after release: only 12 percent by two months out. However, even after one and a half years out of prison, only one in five had secured their own living quarters; the majority continued to depend on family.

The few respondents who secured their own residence by two months out were better able to avoid reincarceration by 16 months out and over the entire three years after release. Predicted 16-month reincarceration probabilities were 12 percent for those living in their own place compared with 37 percent for those not, while 37-month reincarceration probabilities were 35 percent for those in their own place compared with 62 percent for those not.

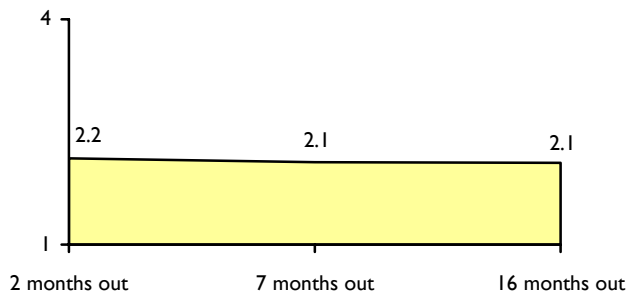
**Figure 6. Lived in Own Place**



After release, nearly two-thirds (62 percent) of the men returned to their old preprison neighborhoods. Those who chose to live in new neighborhoods did so primarily because they wanted to avoid trouble in their old neighborhoods or because their family members had moved. These respondents fared better than those who returned to old neighborhoods: less than half (42 percent) were reincarcerated three years out compared with more than two-thirds (69 percent) of those in old neighborhoods.

When asked about the safety and cohesiveness of their postprison neighborhoods, respondents reported disorganization levels measuring 2 out of 4 across all timepoints measured (figure 7). Regardless of whether their neighborhood was old or new to them, most respondents lived in relatively disorganized communities (e.g., where drug selling was a major problem, staying out of trouble was difficult, and the neighborhood was unsafe). Those who scored above 2 on the scale lived in the most disorganized communities; these respondents were more likely to return to prison in the first 16 months out (38 percent compared with 26 percent for those in more organized communities).

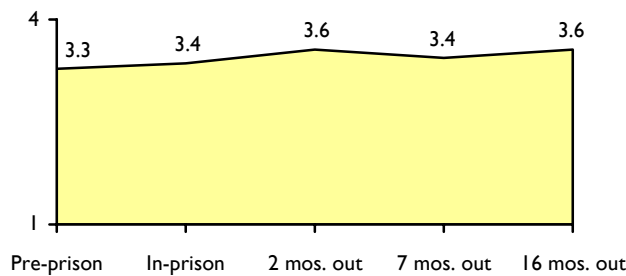
**Figure 7. Neighborhood Disorganization Scale**



**FAMILY AND PEER RELATIONSHIPS**

From respondents’ perspectives, the quality of their relationships with family, partners, and children remained markedly stable from before to after release. Overall, respondents reported very positive family support and relationship quality, averaging 3.5 out of 4 on a scale measuring emotional support and closeness to one’s family (figure 8).

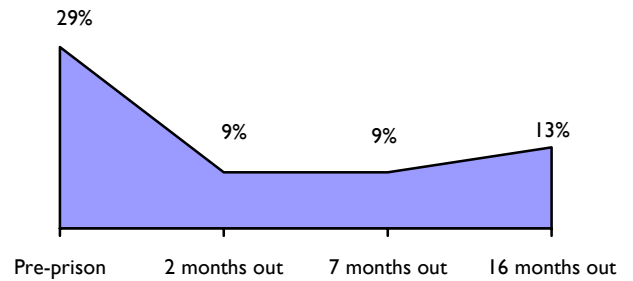
**Figure 8. Family Support and Relationship Quality Scale**



However, more than a quarter (29 percent) reported family violence or conflict before prison; about one out of ten reported the same in the months following their release from prison (figure 9). Respondents who experienced family violence or conflict before prison were twice as likely to return to prison the first 16 months after release (54 percent compared with 26 percent for those

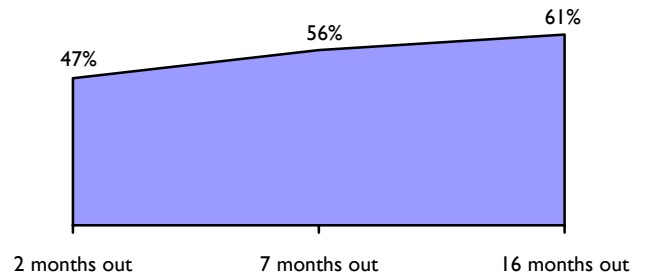
with no prior family problems). Notably, this was the only significant family-related predictor of reincarceration.

**Figure 9. Any Family Violence or Conflict**

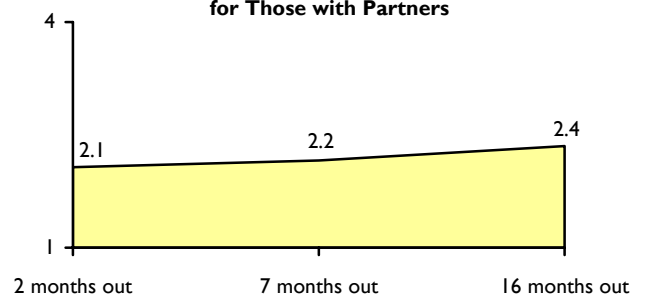


Immediately after release, almost half (47 percent) of the respondents reported being in a partner relationship—a share that increased to nearly two-thirds (61 percent) by 16 months out (figure 10). The quality of partner relationships overall was lower than that reported with regard to other family—respondents averaged only 2.1 to 2.4 out of 4 on a scale measuring the closeness to one’s partner (figure 11).

**Figure 10. Has Partner**



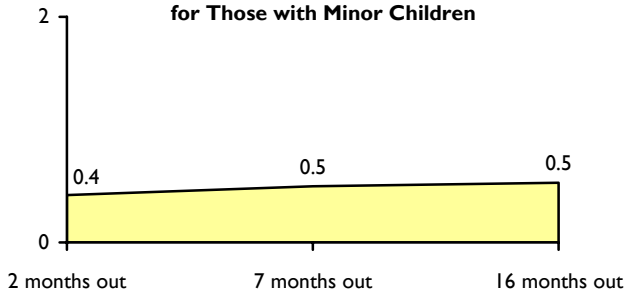
**Figure 11. Partner Relationship Quality Scale, for Those with Partners**



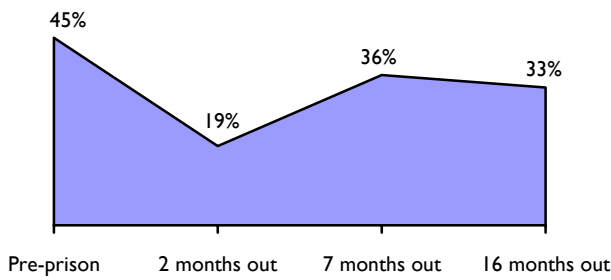
Attachment to children was similarly low for respondents during all 16 months measured after release (averaging 0.5 out of 2) (figure 12). This scale indicated how often respondents played with or talked to their children, placed limits on their children’s behavior, knew where their children were, and were involved in their children’s school-related activities, such as homework. Although just

under half (45 percent) of the men had lived with or financially supported their children before prison, only a fifth (19 percent) did so immediately after release and a third (33 to 36 percent) in subsequent months (figure 13).

**Figure 12. Attachment to Children Scale, for Those with Minor Children**

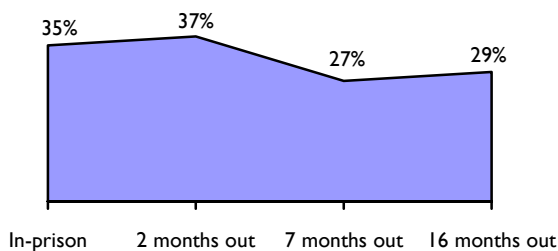


**Figure 13. Lived With or Financially Supported Kids**



The share of respondents with antisocial peers—friends who engaged in criminal or substance abuse behaviors—dropped from about a third in prison and 2 months after release to about a quarter at 7 and 16 months out (figure 14). Notably, those who still reported having antisocial peers 7 months after release were more likely to be reincarcerated later on (from 16 to 37 months out). Predicted probabilities of reincarceration during that time were 54 percent for those with antisocial peers compared with 33 percent for those with none.

**Figure 14. Antisocial Peers**

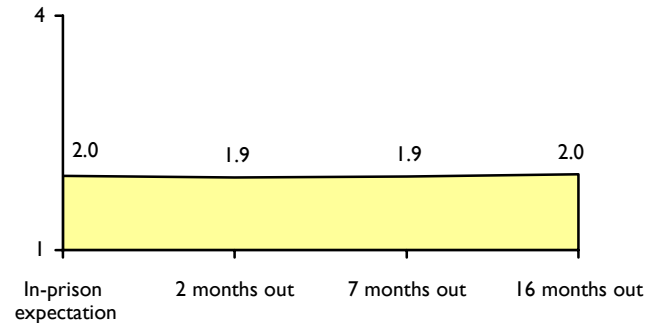


## ATTITUDES AND EXPECTATIONS

Two important scales—one measuring the degree of reintegration difficulties respondents experienced and the

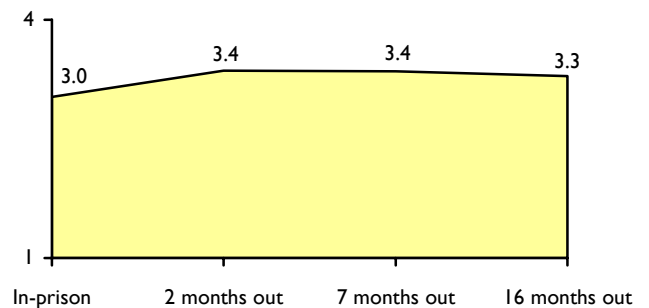
other measuring their sense of self-worth and control over their lives—showed marked stability over time. From responses while still incarcerated to nearly one and a half years after release, respondents reported relatively low levels of difficulty reintegrating, on average, across a wide range of domains (figure 15). The reintegration-difficulties scale measured agreement (4 = strongly agree, 1 = strongly disagree) with statements describing such postrelease difficulties as supporting oneself financially, finding a place to live, renewing relationships with family, and staying out of prison.

**Figure 15. Reintegration-Difficulties Scale**



Similarly, from prerelease to 16 months out, most respondents showed high levels of self-esteem and control over life—scoring 3 out of 4, on average, as they responded to questions indicating satisfaction with themselves, feeling important to others, and belief that one's future depends on oneself (figure 16).

**Figure 16. Self-Esteem and Control over Life Scale**



These findings held true when looking at the average scores across all respondents at each time and when looking at changes in individual respondents' answers across time. These results are interesting in light of the problems we identify throughout this paper. Despite evidence of imperfect reintegration into the community, from respondents' perspectives, life was not that bad and their perceptions of themselves were mostly positive. Notably, respondents' attitudes toward reintegration and their sense of self worth seemed to play no significant role in the likelihood of reincarceration either 16 months or three years after release.

## PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

A fifth of respondents had health insurance the first 7 months after release, and less than a fifth reported a physical or mental health condition during that time (figures 17, 18 and 19). However, by 16 months out, health insurance rates had dropped to 11 percent even though respondents continued to report having physical (17 percent) or mental health conditions (8 percent) at the time.

Figure 17. Health Insurance

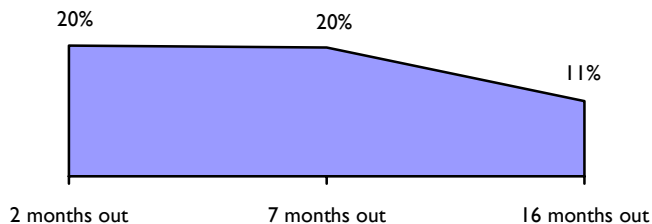


Figure 18. Physical Health Condition

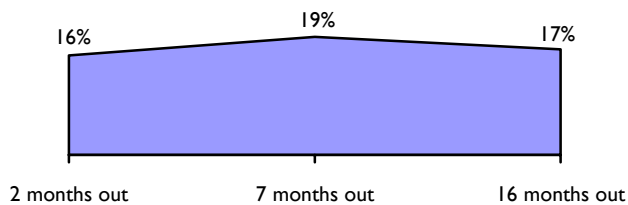
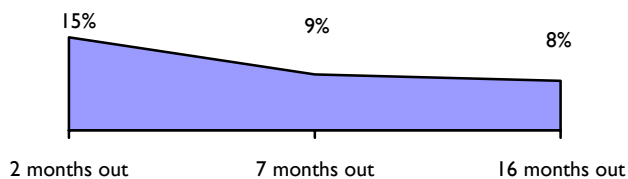


Figure 19. Mental Health Condition



Notably, respondents' health conditions worked to their advantage with regard to their likelihood of reincarceration. Those with a physical or mental health condition were less likely to be reincarcerated after release—perhaps because their routine activities likely centered more around the home than the street. Predicted probabilities of reincarceration were 9 percent (the first 16 months out) for those with a physical health

condition compared with 39 percent for those with none, and 12 percent (from 16 to 37 months out) for those with a mental health condition compared with 42 percent for those with none.

## SUMMARY AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

In summary, respondents' chances at reentry success were largely affected by their experiences before and after incarceration rather than during incarceration. Older respondents and those who were less criminally involved prior to the current offense (e.g., first-time releases or those with no illegal income before prison) fared best in terms of avoiding reincarceration.

Self-sufficiency after release was important to reentry success. Former prisoners who secured their own housing and those employed for longer times after release were less likely to return to prison. Since most lived with family instead of on their own, having good relationships with those family members was also important. Overall, most respondents did—but those who had experienced family violence or conflict before their incarceration were more likely to return to prison after their release.

Also key to reentry success were characteristics of the neighborhoods to which respondents returned. Those who reintegrated into new neighborhoods—especially those characterized by relatively low disorder—fared best in terms of reincarceration likelihood.

Finally, although few respondents enjoyed the benefits of health insurance, having a physical or mental health condition improved their chances of reentry success—probably because it kept respondents largely house-bound rather than on the street. Few of those with a physical or mental condition returned to prison after their release.

Collectively, these findings point to several important policy implications. In addition to prerelease programming provided during incarceration, prisoners must receive sufficient help finding employment and securing housing immediately upon release. Employment and housing are key factors aiding individuals in gaining the sense of responsibility and independence associated with prosocial reintegration. Family counseling, especially for those who report violence or conflict in their family relationships before prison, should also be readily available to prisoners upon release.

<sup>1</sup> Petersilia, J. 2003. *When Prisoners Come Home: Parole and Prisoner Reentry*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Langan, P.A., and Levin, D.J. 2002. *Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 1994*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics.

<sup>3</sup> Since the study began, there have been some changes in Illinois's correctional system, including the opening of a treatment prison targeting substance-abusing offenders and ongoing revisions to parole supervision and revocation practices.

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<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Visser, C., Kachnowski, V., La Vigne, N., and Travis, J. 2004. "Baltimore Prisoners' Experiences Returning Home." Washington, DC: The Urban Institute. Visser, C., and Courtney, S. 2006. "Cleveland Prisoners' Experiences Returning Home." Washington, DC: The Urban Institute. La Vigne, N., and Kachnowski, V. 2005. "Texas Prisoners' Reflections on Returning Home." Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.

<sup>5</sup> In Texas, prisoners from state jails were also interviewed.

<sup>6</sup> Woolridge, J.M. 2002. "Inverse Probability Weighted m-Estimators for Sample Selection, Attrition, and Stratification." *Institute for Fiscal Studies, Cemmap Working Paper* (cwp 11/02). Hirano, K., Imbens, G.W., and Ridder, G. 2003. "Efficient Estimation of Average Treatment Effects Using the Estimated Propensity Score." *Econometrica* 71(4): 1161–89.

<sup>7</sup> Reincarceration data covered all returns to Illinois state prisons (not jails) from the time of release to 37 months after prison.

<sup>8</sup> Predicted probabilities were calculated from multivariate regression models that included all variables significantly ( $p < .10$ ) related to the reincarceration outcome of interest—either 16- or 37-month out reincarceration. Thus, predicted probabilities control for other factors relevant to reincarceration so that differences in reentry success specific to the predictor being discussed are highlighted.

<sup>9</sup> Perhaps because of limited variation in reported rates, substance use had no significant effect on reincarceration likelihood either 16 months or three years after release.