



# Life after Prison: Tracking the Experiences of Male Prisoners Returning to Chicago, Cleveland, and Houston



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### **The Returning Home Study**

*Returning Home: Understanding the Challenges of Prisoner Reentry* is a longitudinal study of prisoner reentry in Maryland, Illinois, Ohio, and Texas led by staff at the Urban Institute's Justice Policy Center. 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. Additional information on *Returning Home*, including other publications that present findings from individual states, can be found online at <http://www.urban.org/projects/reentry-portfolio/index.cfm>.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF RETURNING PRISONERS

This research brief provides a portrait of a group of 652 men who were surveyed shortly before their release from prison and interviewed two times following their release—once at two months after release and a second time at about seven months after release. The average age of these men at the time of release was 36 years. The study included:

- 652 men exiting Illinois, Ohio, and Texas prisons and returning to the Chicago, Cleveland, and Houston areas;
- Three waves of interviews, conducted shortly before and at two points (two and seven months) after release; and
- Questions about preprison characteristics, reentry preparation prior to release, expectations for release, postprison relationships, and engagement in pro- and antisocial behaviors.

Most exiting male prisoners in the study were African American or Latino, and they were typically no strangers to the criminal justice system, with multiple prior convictions and, in many cases, previous stays in prison:

- 76 percent were African American; 8 percent, Latino;
- 83 percent had at least one prior conviction (64 percent had two or more prior convictions); and
- 68 percent had at least one prior prison stay (45 percent had two or more previous stays in state prisons).

## OVERVIEW OF THE REENTRY EXPERIENCE

### *Participation in Programs*

While the men enjoyed some access to programs in prison, one in three (32%) expressed an interest in programs that were unavailable. Program participation data showed that:

- 72 percent participated in a prerelease program, and
- 82 percent participated in at least one other in-prison program.

Men participated in an array of programs:

- 25 percent participated in RSAT/SAFP (substance abuse programs) and 42 percent participated in other substance abuse programs, including Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous;

## Methodology

The *Returning Home* study entailed three waves of interviews with men\* serving one or more years in state prisons and returning to the areas of Chicago, Illinois; Cleveland, Ohio; and Houston, Texas. Study samples were recruited from 2002 to 2003 in Illinois and from 2004 to 2005 in Ohio and Texas. The first survey was administered just prior to release to collect information on respondents' experiences before and during their incarceration. After release, two in-person interviews collected information on experiences immediately after and during the year following release. Participants who were reincarcerated during the follow-up period remained in the study and were interviewed while in confinement. For more on study recruitment and participation, see La Vigne, Visher, and Castro 2004; Visher, Baer, and Naser 2006; and La Vigne and Kachnowski 2005.

The findings in this report are based on analyses of male prisoners who participated in the prerelease survey and both waves of postrelease interviews ( $N = 652$ ). To increase the comparability of findings to the entire sample of prerelease participants ( $N = 1,036$ ), we employed inverse probability weighting using a wide range of measures from the prerelease survey and official criminal justice records to adjust for sample attrition.

\* Women were also included in the larger study (see, La Vigne, Brooks, and Shollenberger 2009).

- 37 percent participated in employment readiness; 33 percent in GED/basic education; and 23 percent in trade and job training;
- 31 percent took life skills classes; 29 percent participated in anger management/violence prevention; 25 percent were in counseling; 14 percent took parenting classes; 1 percent were in boot camps; and 17 percent participated in other program(s).

## Housing and Neighborhoods

At the time of release, housing was a challenge for some men, and housing stability diminished over time for many of them.

- Before release, 79 percent thought it would be *pretty easy* or *very easy* to find a place to live after prison.
- Relatively few men said they had trouble finding a place to live after release because of their criminal record (5 percent said they had trouble two months out; 8 percent said they had trouble seven months out).
- Yet, two months out, nearly half (45 percent) expected to live at their current location only a few more months or less, another 25 percent expected to live where they were for only a year, and less than a third (30 percent) thought they would remain at their current residence for more than a year. At seven months out, just under half (48 percent) hoped to live at their current location a year or longer, while 52 percent hoped to live there less than a year.
- Residential mobility for these men increased over time: at two months out, 84 percent had lived at one location since release and 16 percent at two or more locations. Seven months out, 65 percent had lived at one location since release, 25 percent at two locations, and 10 percent at three or more locations.

While most men were satisfied with their living arrangements and considered their neighborhoods safe, they also reported residing in areas where drug dealing was problematic and jobs were scarce.

- Two months out, 59 percent said the place they were currently living met their expectations, while 36 percent felt it exceeded their expectations.
- At both two and seven months out, 75 percent believed their neighborhood was a good place to live. Yet at each interview wave, half the men indicated that drug selling was a major problem in their neighborhood.
- Two months out, 41 percent believed their neighborhood was a good place to find a job; seven months out, 37 percent agreed.

## Family Relationships

Family members were a key housing resource for most men, and they also provided cash, food, and emotional support. However, many men reported family members who were using drugs and/or involved in the criminal justice system.

## Funding Sources

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- At the time of release, 58 percent of the men had money with them that was sent by a family member.
- On their first night out of prison, 56 percent slept at a relative's house; 22 percent at their own place; 10 percent at a friend's house; 7 percent at a transitional facility or halfway house; 2 percent at a shelter; and 2 percent at a hotel, motel, or rooming house.
- Two months out, 85 percent were living with family and 75 percent said family was a source of financial support.
- Seven months out, 84 percent were living with family, 92 percent had received cash from their family, and 83 percent received food from their family. Also, 92 percent said they had someone in their family to help them find a place to live.

Respondents also scored high on scales measuring family emotional support and relationship quality. With scale scores ranging from 1 to 4 (with 4 equaling closer relationships), respondents scored 3.4 on both the family support and family relationship quality scales at two months out, and 3.3 and 3.4, respectively, at seven months out.

These support levels were high despite the criminal justice and substance use histories of family members:

- 65 percent of men reported having at least one family member convicted of a crime;
- 64 percent had one or more family member with a drug or alcohol problem; and
- 32 percent had one or more family member currently in prison at the time of their own incarceration.

## Substance Use

Most men reported extensive histories of substance use prior to incarceration and nearly one in three reported substance use after release.

- 80 percent reported using drugs or getting intoxicated in the six months before their current incarceration, and 64 percent reported frequent (more than weekly) drug use or intoxication.
- Two months out, 20 percent reported drug use or intoxication in the past month.
- Seven months out, 27 percent reported drug use and/or intoxication in the past month, and 13 percent reported frequent drug use or intoxication.

## Identification, Debt, and Employment

In terms of supporting themselves financially, men left prison with hundreds of dollars in debt, and many faced challenges seeking employment due to lack of photo identification and the existence of a criminal record.

- More than half (59 percent) did not have a photo ID at release. Most of those who did have a photo ID only had a department

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of corrections (55 percent) or state (34 percent) ID card; only 19 percent of those with a photo ID—8 percent of all men—had a driver's license.

- By two months out, 52 percent said they had obtained a new photo ID since release, but for most, they were referring to a state ID (65 percent) rather than driver's license (24 percent).
- 58 percent owed debt seven months out, and 60 percent had owed debt at two months out.
- At both two and seven months out, 71 percent of those who had looked for a job said their criminal record affected their job search.

Despite these challenges, 46 percent of the men were employed by seven months out, and most (82 percent) reported that their employer was aware of their criminal record.

## REOFFENDING AND REINCARCERATION

Although most men in this study expressed optimism about their ability to avoid crime and drug use after release (La Vigne, Visher, and Castro 2004; La Vigne and Kachnowski 2005; Visher, Baer, and Naser 2006), many returned to criminal involvement or were reincarcerated during the year following their release from prison. In the first two months after release, just 4 percent of men reported engaging in criminal activity. By seven months out, one in six men (17 percent) reported having committed at least one crime since release. Of those who said they reoffended, the most common forms of criminal activity reported were drug possession (29 percent), theft (11 percent), drug dealing (7 percent), assault (5 percent), burglary (4 percent), and other types of crime (16 percent). Self-reported arrests also increased between two and seven months out:

- Self-reported rearrest was 4 percent at two months out and 24 percent at seven months out.

Official data from departments of corrections confirm these self-reports of criminal activity and rearrest:

- One in five men (22 percent) returned to state custody within a year of release from prison; the average time to reincarceration was eight months.

Among prisoners who were returned to custody, 70 percent returned due to a violation of their supervision (e.g., technical violation, arrest, failed drug test).

## PREDICTING REINTEGRATION OUTCOMES

Several previously published reports identified the most salient predictors of reintegration outcomes among men in this study (e.g., Visher et al. 2008; La Vigne, Shollenberger, and Debus 2009; Yahner et al. 2008). Through use of multivariate analyses, those reports highlighted the importance of in-prison job training and education in helping former prisoners work more months during the first year after release. Men who had held an in-prison job, participated in job

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training while incarcerated, earned a GED during prison, and/or participated in an employment program early after release worked a greater percentage of time the first year out than those who did not. Other factors that increased the likelihood of employment the first year out included having worked before prison, lining up a job before release, and using a former employer to find a job after release (Visser et al. 2008; La Vigne, Shollenberger, and Debus 2009). Notably, being released to parole supervision also helped men find employment and simultaneously reduced their likelihood of substance use after release (Yahner et al. 2008). Additional inhibitors of substance use the first year out included participating in drug treatment early after release and having higher levels of tangible support from one's family (La Vigne, Shollenberger, and Debus 2009). In fact, men who had children to whom they were strongly attached enjoyed better employment *and* substance use outcomes after release, while those who were married were more likely to report current employment eight months after release (Visser et al. 2008; La Vigne, Shollenberger, and Debus 2009).

With regard to predicting reincarceration the first year after release, men who worked before prison and those who found employment soon after release were less likely to return to prison one year out (Visser et al. 2008; La Vigne, Shollenberger, and Debus 2009). Additionally, men who participated in an employment or substance abuse treatment program while incarcerated or participated in any programming early after release were better able to avoid reincarceration the first year out (La Vigne, Shollenberger, and Debus 2009). Parole supervision, on the other hand, had almost no impact on self-reported crime or rearrest after release, but increased the likelihood of reincarceration—mostly due to technical violations (Yahner et al. 2008).

## IMPLICATIONS

The *Returning Home* study helped identify and quantify the challenges male prisoners face upon returning to the large urban areas of Chicago, Cleveland, and Houston. These challenges highlight the many ways policymakers might lend support to former prisoners for both public safety and cost-reduction reasons.

Many men in the study struggled with extensive criminal and substance use histories, and significant shares returned to crime (17 percent, self-reported), substance use (27 percent), and prison (22 percent, official) within 7 to 12 months of release. Although most prisoners participated in some type of in-prison programming, a third were unable to participate in a program they felt was needed. These findings suggest that expanding the availability and quality of in-prison programming would be worthwhile.

While nearly half the men found some employment by seven months out, most still owed debt and were unable to live on their own, instead relying on family for financial and housing support. Exiting prisoners also turned to family for emotional support, and men with supportive families had better employment and substance use outcomes after release. Contrary to some views, family members

with prior criminal or substance use problems did not appear to create difficulties for men returning to the community. These findings imply that policies designed to help prisoners obtain their own financial and housing security after release could help men gain a sense of responsibility and independence associated with prosocial reintegration. Further, mentoring and postrelease counseling to help men address the negative family and neighborhood influences in their lives might also help many achieve successful reintegration.

Finally, the *Returning Home* study has shown that men being released from prison are optimistic about their ability to lead crime- and drug-free lives. However, this and other research has also documented that the initial months after release from prison are a high-risk period for relapse and reoffending. Exiting prisoners need to have access to programs and services immediately upon release and continuing for several months to ensure that these individuals can translate their desire for successful reintegration into prosocial activities and behaviors.

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