

Statement by
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At a hearing on
Housing D.C. Code Felons Far Away from Home:
Effects on Crime, Recidivism, and Reentry

by the
House of Representatives Oversight and Government Reform Subcommittee on
Federal Workforce, Postal Service, and the District of Columbia
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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today about the implications of D.C. Code felons being housed far from their homes. I am the director of the Justice Policy Center at the Urban Institute, where we have engaged in extensive research on the topic of prisoner reentry. We have documented the many challenges of prisoner reentry and conducted studies to identify factors that predict both successful prisoner reintegration and recidivism. Among those studies, we have specifically examined D.C. Code felons. We learned that, like their counterparts throughout the country, incarcerated D.C. Code felons return home in need of health care, drug treatment, jobs, and affordable shelter (Hall et al. 2009; Roman and Kane 2006). But D.C. felons face an unusual incarceration experience in that they are typically incarcerated hundreds of miles from their families, potential employers, and postrelease services (Roman and Kane 2006). In fact, over 20 percent of

these felons are housed more than 500 miles from their homes (CSOSA 2010).¹ Research points to two reasons that distance from home presents additional challenges for returning prisoners: it can diminish family support and it makes finding treatment and services difficult.

Our studies have found that families are an important influence on the reentry process and they provide much-needed support to returning prisoners (Naser and La Vigne 2006). But family support is more than simply helpful; both emotional and tangible support, such as housing and financial assistance, are associated with higher employment rates and reduced substance use (La Vigne, Visher, and Castro 2004; Visher et al. 2004; La Vigne, Schollenberger, and Debus 2009).

This support from families, however, is not a given. Rather, it is closely linked to the nature and type of contact prisoners have with their family members—parents, intimate partners, children—prior to their release. In fact, our research has found that in-prison contact with family members is predictive of the strength of family relationships following release (Naser and La Vigne 2006). Other studies have shown that family contact during incarceration is associated with lower recidivism rates (Adams and Fischer 1976; Glaser 1969; Hairston 2002; Holt and Miller 1972; Klein, Bartholomew, and Hibbert 2002; Ohlin 1954). Such contact can maintain or reinforce attachments to children, giving exiting prisoners a greater stake in conformity upon release. This could yield major benefits, as we have learned that exiting male prisoners who have strong positive attachments to their children tend to be legally employed for longer periods than fathers who have weaker ties to their kids (Visher, Debus, Yahner 2008).

¹ The average distance nationwide is 100 miles for male prisoners (see Hagan and Petty 2002).

Maintaining and even strengthening family ties during incarceration can bolster the positive impact that family can have after a prisoner's release. But our surveys of family members of returning prisoners found that the single greatest barrier to staying in touch with their incarcerated relatives was the long distance between prison and their homes (Shollenberger 2009). For many, this issue was closely linked to a lack of transportation, which was the second most commonly cited obstacle to contact and was cited by nearly two in five family members in the study (Shollenberger 2009). Clearly, the closer prisoners are housed to their homes, the more contact they will have with family.

In addition to maintaining ties with family, creating linkages to jobs and reentry services prior to release is vital for reentry success. Research finds that the most effective reentry programs begin behind bars and continue in the community (Gaes et al. 1999). A challenge common to administrators of state-operated reentry programs is that prisons are not typically located near the cities to which most prisoners return. But at least those administrators are working within the same state system. By contrast, reentry planners working with D.C. felons must coordinate between federal and local systems while operating in completely different states. The distance between a correctional facility and the prisoner's postrelease destination makes connecting with employment, housing, substance abuse treatment, faith-based institutions, and other reentry resources all the more difficult.

To be fair, there are likely some downsides to housing prisoners close to home. From a correctional security standpoint, the increased visitation that would result from incarcerating people closer to their homes could open up more possibilities for the

introduction of contraband into the prisons. And, if D.C. Code felons are housed in fewer prisons closer to home, correctional officers would need to monitor the potential for gang violence more closely. These are real risks, but they are far outweighed by the documented benefits of housing prisoners close to home. With all the challenges associated with the reentry of D.C. felons, this is one change that can have a positive impact not only on the successful transition of those returning home from prison but on the safety and well-being of the families and communities to which they return. In the meantime, efforts to facilitate connections between prisoners and postrelease service providers through the use of video conferencing should be supported and expanded to include communications with family members.

Thank you for your time. I welcome any questions you may have.

Note

The views expressed are those of the author and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders.

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