



# Women on the Outside: Understanding the Experiences of Female Prisoners Returning to Houston, Texas



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**Nancy G. La Vigne**  
**Lisa E. Brooks**  
**Tracey L. Shollenberger**

## About 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.

The JEHT Foundation, the Houston Endowment, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Robert Wood Johnson 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.

Additional information on *Returning Home*, including other publications that present findings from Texas, can be found online at <http://www.urban.org/projects/reen-try-portfolio/index.cfm>.

The challenges associated with the incarceration and release of adult felons in the United States are tremendous. The number of incarcerated adults in the United States is at a record high and all indications point to continued growth in the foreseeable future. This growth amounts to increasing shares of the adult population behind bars, with the rate of increase among females surpassing that of their male counterparts. While women represent a small minority of adults who are incarcerated and released from state correctional facilities, they are nonetheless an important population worthy of research.

Prior research indicates that both the circumstances precipitating incarceration and the challenges affecting post-release reintegration are uniquely different for women than for men (O'Brien 2001, Richie 2001). Women who get caught up in the criminal justice system have extensive histories of drug use (Blume 1990), are likely to be clinically depressed (Blume 1990), tend to have low self esteem (Bloom and Covington 2000). They also have fewer job skills than their male counterparts (Messina, Burdon and Prendergast 2001). These factors all play into post-release outcomes for women, who are more likely than men to be homeless (Bloom 1998) and to have problems with intimate partners (Chesney-Lind 1997, Owen and Bloom 1995). Incarcerated and recently released women also exhibit greater ties to their children than men and are much more likely to have childcare responsibilities both before and after release (Belknap 1996). Thus, the process of post-release reunification of mothers with their children can be a unique reentry challenge in itself, along with the challenge of earning a living while resuming childcare responsibilities.

In Texas alone, 12,243 women are incarcerated in state correctional facilities at any given time, with 10,851 women released each year. Among those women, over one in five (21.7 percent) return to Harris County, home to Houston, Texas.<sup>1</sup>

This research brief explores the unique experiences of women exiting prison, focusing on a representative sample of 142 women who were released from Texas state prisons and state jails in 2005 (see State Jail sidebar for definitions) and returned to Houston communities. Because the information presented here stems from a larger study of both male and female returning prisoners, significant differences

## Methodology

The Returning Home-Texas study entailed three waves of interviews with male and female prisoners returning to the Houston area in 2005. The first survey was administered just prior to release (N = 676), and the remaining two surveys were administered at two to four months after release (N = 509) and eight to ten months after release (N = 378). Study participants who were reincarcerated in state or local correctional institutions during the study were interviewed while in confinement. The findings presented in this research brief are based on analyses of the responses of only those women who participated in the prerelease survey and both waves of postrelease interviews (N = 142). To increase the comparability of analysis findings to the entire sample of prerelease participants, we employed inverse probability weighting using a wide range of measures from the prerelease interview to adjust for sample attrition.

To predict reentry outcomes, we used multivariate logistic regression. All analyses controlled for age, race (white/nonwhite), marital status (married or living as married), parental status (minor children), employment history (employed in the six months prior to their most recent incarceration), education (high school graduate or GED), criminal history (number of previous prison stays), and correctional facility type (state jail versus state prison). Given the small sample size, relationships reported as significant are those at a probability equal to or less than 0.10.

between the experiences of women and men are highlighted throughout this report. Issues of pre-prison characteristics, reentry preparation behind bars, expectations for release, post-prison relationships and engagement in both pro- and anti-social behaviors are examined in detail. Results of regression analyses identifying the individual characteristics and experiences associated with post-release employment, substance abuse, and criminal behavior are also reported.

The findings are presented with an eye toward how policies and practices designed to promote the successful reentry of prisoners might be adapted or enhanced to support women who are returning home.

## OVERVIEW OF THE FEMALE REENTRY EXPERIENCE

Before delving into the statistics stemming from this research project, we begin by painting a more qualitative picture of the experiences of formerly incarcerated women who call Houston their home. While each woman's story is unique, the broad brushstrokes are quite similar: Women who do time in Texas's state prisons and jails usually have extensive histories of criminal justice involvement, with several prior convictions but few (if any) previous stays in state correctional facilities. They are typically incarcerated for low-level property or drug possession offenses, and are likely to have serious and long-term substance use problems. These issues often co-occur with mental health problems, with depression high on the list of medically diagnosed ailments.

Among those who are mothers, their children are often what they most look forward to upon release. While they generally have some form of family or social support on the outside, these relationships are not as strong as those experienced by formerly incarcerated men. Women experience more conflict with family members upon returning home; this is particularly true for relationships with intimate partners. Women are much less likely than men to receive financial support from parents following release, but that void in support is typically filled by their intimate partners and children.

In terms of supporting themselves financially, the goal of finding and retaining a job during the first several months following release remains elusive for the majority of women. Women are much less likely to have received job training or to have gained vocational skills while behind bars, and are less apt to take part in job placement services upon release. This employment hurdle, combined with the limited financial assistance families and intimate partners are willing or able to provide, may explain the fact that women exiting prison report more difficulties meeting their day-to-day financial needs and experience more residential instability than do men.

The unique obstacles that women face during their post-prison reintegration, driven largely by their differences in pre-prison substance use and employment histories, continue to play a role in terms of subsequent criminal behavior. At one year out, women are more likely than men to engage in drug use, to have problems stemming from drug use, and to have partners who drink or use drugs daily. Perhaps not surprisingly, women are almost twice as likely as men to be back behind bars in a year's time, typically due to a drug-related offense or a property offense driven by addiction problems.

As the report below describes in hard numbers, women have different experiences from men, both behind bars and on the outside. They face reentry challenges with a different set of skills and deficits, and those differences are manifested in higher rates of relapse and recidivism. All this suggests that a focus on women as a distinct subpopulation of persons reentering society is critical to the development of effective policies and practices. We now turn to a more detailed description of who these women are and how they navigate the transition from prison to the community.

## **DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS**

This report tells the stories of a group of 142 women who were interviewed<sup>2</sup> shortly before their release from prison and two times following their release—once at two to four months after release, and a second time at eight to ten months after release. Two-thirds (63 percent) of these women described themselves as black, a quarter (24 percent) were white, and thirteen percent described themselves as being of another race or biracial. Just over one in ten women identified themselves as Hispanic or Latina (12 percent). The average age of these women at the time of release was 36 years.<sup>3</sup>

## **FAMILY STATUS**

In terms of their family status, just over half (56 percent) of the women had never been married when they entered prison or state jail, and about a quarter (23 percent) had been married or living with a partner when they were incarcerated. Over two-thirds (69 percent) were mothers at

the time they were incarcerated and an additional three percent gave birth during their time in prison or state jail. Of those who had children at the time they were incarcerated, most (83 percent) had more than one child, and 79 percent had at least one child under 18. Of those with minor children, over two thirds (67 percent) were living with their children and nearly three quarters (74 percent) were providing financial support for their children in the months leading up to their incarceration.

## **PRE-PRISON HISTORY**

Most women had histories of substance use when they entered prison, with 83 percent reporting illegal drug use in the 6 months before prison, and almost a third (30 percent) reporting heavy drug use.<sup>4</sup> The duration of drug use was often extensive: Of the women who reported using illegal drugs prior to incarceration, the average length of use was seven years,<sup>5</sup> with almost 40 percent having used for ten years or more.

In terms of educational and employment skills or deficits, 58 percent of women had a high school degree<sup>6</sup> when they entered prison or state jail—a proportion roughly equal to their male counterparts in Texas. Over half (58 percent) of women reported legal employment in the six months before entering prison or jail. Nevertheless, nearly as many (56 percent) reported receiving some income from illegal activity in the six months before incarceration, and 22 percent received most or all of their income from illegal activity during this time.<sup>7</sup>

The experiences with illegal drug use and criminal activity among these women might suggest that most are repeat visitors to Texas prisons, yet only sixteen percent of women had been previously incarcerated in a Texas state correctional facility. However, more than three-quarters (81 percent) had prior criminal convictions; a meaningful share (28 percent) were first arrested before the age of 18; and one in five (20 percent) had spent time in juvenile detention. On average, however, women became involved in the criminal justice system later in life than their male

### **State Prisons versus State Jails**

In 1995, the Texas State Legislature enacted a new sentencing category for Class A misdemeanants and third-degree felons and created a separate category of state correctional facilities designed to house these low-level offenders, which it termed “state jails.” Not to be confused with local county jails, those confined in state jails are sentenced to community-based, state-operated facilities for a term of 75 days to two years.

counterparts, with the median age at first arrest for women being 21, compared to 18 for men.<sup>8</sup> Despite this difference, the average number of prior convictions for men and women is the same.<sup>9</sup>

### **PRISON EXPERIENCES**

In Texas, convicted felons sentenced to two or more years in prison are housed in state prisons, while lower-level offenders serve time in state jails, which primarily house drug and property offenders and probation violators. Over two-thirds of the women we spoke with (70 percent) were incarcerated at a state jail facility, while 30 percent were sentenced to state prison. The vast majority (96 percent) of all women exiting state prisons and jails were serving time for non-violent offenses.<sup>10</sup> Forty-seven percent were incarcerated for drug possession, 18 percent for drug sales or manufacturing, and 23 percent for property offenses. Just under ten percent were incarcerated for a parole or probation violation.

On average, these women served just less than seven months behind bars.<sup>11</sup> Nearly all (96 percent) women participated in some type of program while they were incarcerated, with the most common being Project RIO<sup>12</sup> (60 percent). Despite the significant drug use histories among this group, however, fewer than two in five (39 percent) reported receiving any substance abuse treatment or participating in Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous (AA/NA). Most of these women (69 percent) participated

in AA or NA, rather than an intensive substance abuse treatment program.

Fewer than half (44 percent) of the women participated in a transition program while in prison or state jail. Among those who participated in programs designed to prepare them for release, the length and design of these programs varied. While about half (53 percent) of those who participated in pre-release programs started the program three months or more before their release, over a quarter (26 percent) were offered transitional services only in their last week of incarceration. While these prerelease programs covered a range of topics, information typically covered such topics as how to: access alcohol and drug treatment; seek employment; continue education; find a place to live; and obtain photo identification. On the whole, participants viewed prerelease services favorably: when interviewed two to four months after release, 80 percent said that prerelease programs had been helpful to them.

### **EXPECTATIONS FOR RELEASE**

Women expressed high levels of optimism in the days leading up to their release, with most indicating it would be easy to renew their relationships with family (71 percent) and children (57 percent). While one in three women (29 percent) reported that she would be attempting to regain custody of her children, fewer than nine percent of all women anticipated difficulty doing this. Overall, the biggest concerns among women exiting prison were finding a job and supporting themselves—with 29 percent and 24 percent of respondents, respectively, anticipating that these goals would be difficult to achieve after release. In addition to these concrete obstacles, one in four women (24 percent) expressed concerns that finding social acceptance would be difficult. And, while women were no more likely to expect reentry difficulties than men, they did express a greater need for help with housing, education, and substance abuse treatment.

## BASIC NEEDS AND SUPPORT

Upon release, women faced a host of challenges. These ranged from the immediate challenges of obtaining housing and adequate financial support to finding gainful employment, achieving independence, and providing for their families. As with men, family ties were an important factor in the set of challenges women faced and the resources available to help them meet those challenges.

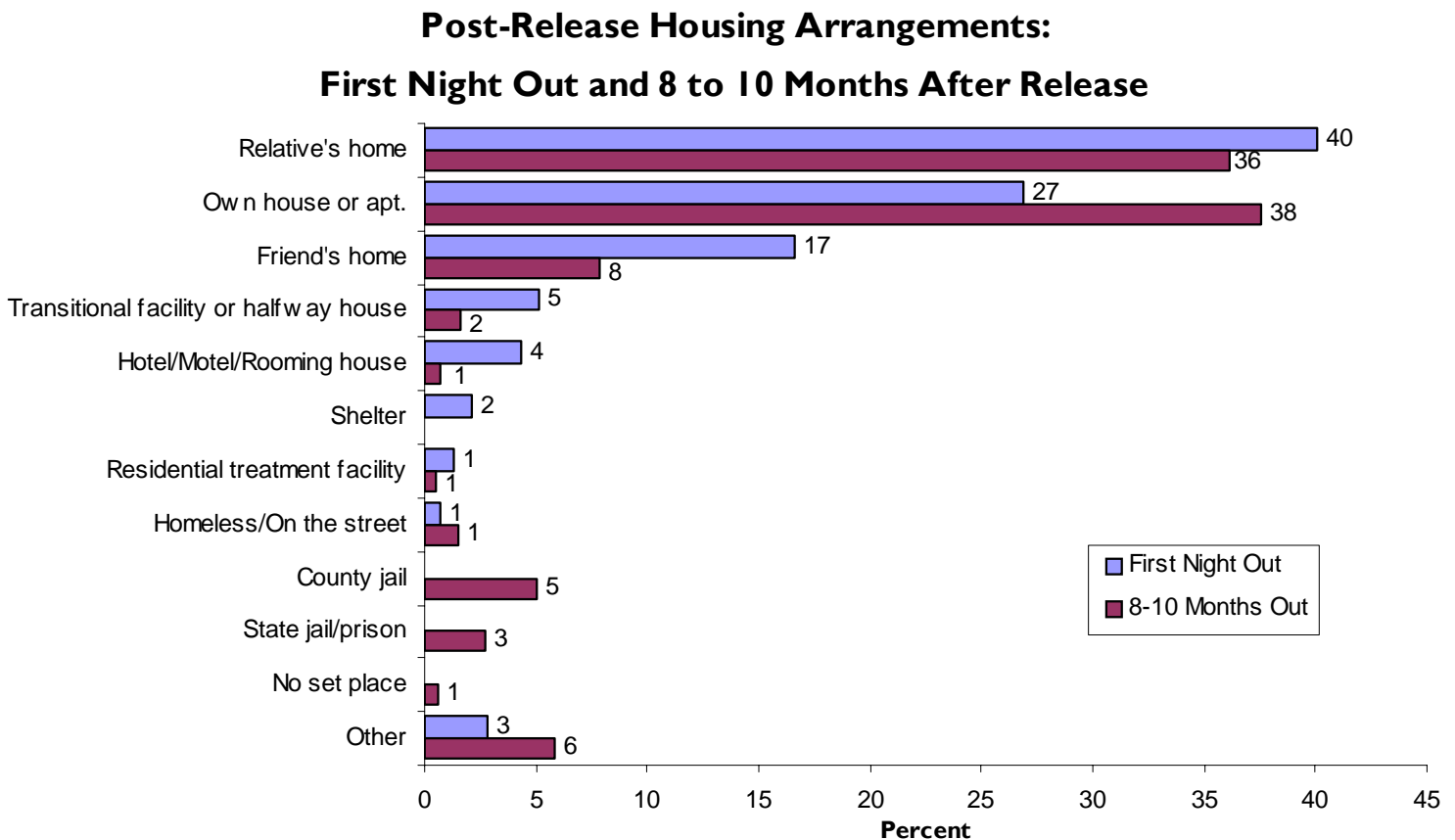
## HOUSING

Most women (83 percent) reported that they had a place to live lined up before their release, and those expectations held on the outside: The majority stayed with family (40 percent) or friends (17 percent) immediately after release, and just over one-fourth (27 percent) stayed in their own homes. For the most part, housing stability increased over time. As seen in Figure I,<sup>13</sup> at eight to ten months after their release from prison, a significant share of women were still living with family (36 percent), and the share

of women living in their own homes had increased to 38 percent. Much smaller shares of women were living in a friend's home, staying in transitional or halfway housing, or homeless and living on the street.

While increased stability in housing is typically viewed as a positive outcome, it bears mentioning that the living environments for some of these women were not necessarily positive influences in their efforts to successfully transition from prison to the community. By eight to ten months out, about one in three women (31 percent) had lived with another formerly incarcerated person at some point since her release, and about one in five was living with someone who was abusing drugs (19 percent) or alcohol (22 percent). Housing options for these women were likely limited, as nearly one in four women (23 percent) reported that her criminal record had been an obstacle to finding housing at some point since release.

Figure I.



It is also interesting to note that, while stability in housing increased for women over time, women had less stable housing arrangements than their male counterparts. By eight to ten months after release, over half the women (59 percent) had moved at least once, while only 39 percent of men had moved. On average, women had lived in two places since release, with 26 percent having lived in three or more places since release. While only one in three (34 percent) expected to remain in her current housing for more than a year after the interview, the vast majority of women felt safe where they were living (92 percent).

**EMPLOYMENT**

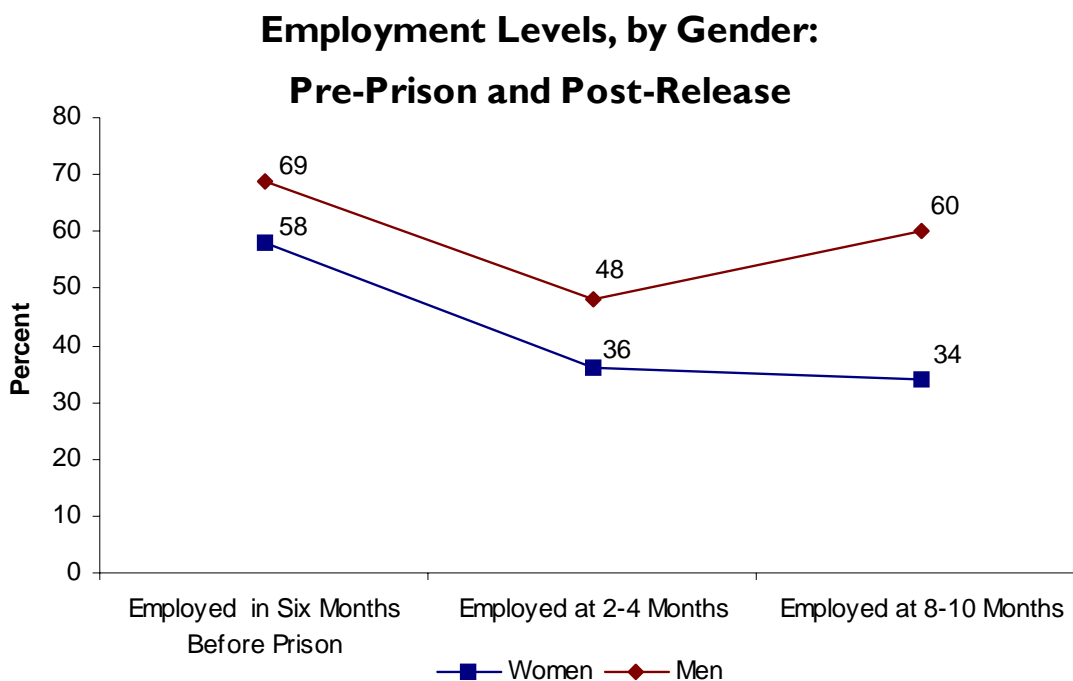
Finding and keeping employment is well documented as a key predictor of reentry success for formerly incarcerated persons. Unfortunately, women experienced tremendous difficulties in obtaining legal employment throughout the year after release. While over half had worked before prison (58 percent), only 36 percent were working at two to four months following their release and by eight to ten months out, the share of women who were working remained roughly the same (34 percent).<sup>14</sup>

Notably, over the same time period, employment

among men rose from 48 to 60 percent (see Figure 2). In addition, women were far less likely than men to be working full time: Only 51 percent of employed women were working 35 or more hours per week, compared to 82 percent of men.<sup>15</sup> Both before and after incarceration, women had lower rates of employment and lower hourly wages than men and were more likely to work in food service or retail sectors rather than in skilled manual trades.

Among the two-thirds of all women who were not working at eight to ten months out, one in five (20 percent) reported that they were permanently disabled, while another 22 percent had difficulty finding a job. Notably, only five percent said that childcare responsibilities were the reason they were not working. Motherhood and childcare responsibilities did not appear to hinder women’s ability to work full-time. In fact, women with and without children were equally likely to work full time; only one employed woman cited childcare as a reason for working less than full-time. Instead, the most common reason women provided for working less than full-time is that only part-time work was available.

Figure 2.



**Table 1. Predictors of Employment 8-10 Months Out**

Women who had...	Women who had...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a high school diploma or GED</li> <li>• worked in the six months prior to prison</li> <li>• participated in job training in prison</li> <li>• a spouse or common-law partner</li> <li>• minor children</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• extensive histories of substance abuse</li> </ul>
<b>...were more likely to be employed.</b>	<b>...were less likely to be employed.</b>

Regression analyses examining what personal characteristics, histories, and experiences contribute to post-release employment indicate that education, prior work experience, and participation in pre-release programming are the most influential (see Table 1). Women with a school diploma or GED, those who had been employed in the six months prior to prison, and those who took part in pre-release programs worked more often in the months following their release. Family status was also a predictor of women’s employment: Those who were married or living as married prior to prison worked more than those who were not. Women with minor children also worked more, with the amount of work increasing with the number of children under 18. Abstinence from drug and alcohol abuse was one of the strongest predictors of employment; the lower the reported level of substance abuse two to four months after release, the higher the extent of employment eight to ten months out.

**FINANCIAL SUPPORT**

Given the relatively low levels of employment for this group, it stands to reason that they would rely heavily on family and friends for financial support. Eight to ten months after release, nearly two-thirds (65 percent) reported receiving financial support from a family member, spouse, or friend, while fewer than a third (28 percent) reported legal employment as a source of income, with a similar share reporting under-the-table income (25 percent). Nearly one-fifth (18 percent) had received public assistance, 15 percent had received Social Security or Social

Security Disability Insurance, and 10 percent reported income from illegal activities.

Since the majority of these income sources are not distributed on any regular schedule, it is not surprising that many women reported difficulties in meeting their day-to-day financial obligations. At eight to ten months after release, more than two thirds (70 percent) said they sometimes or often had barely enough money to get by, nearly two-thirds (63 percent) said they often had trouble paying their bills, and more than half (59 percent) reported worrying about how they were going to survive financially. The financial difficulties these women faced manifested themselves in tangible ways: 30 percent had trouble keeping housing and 30 percent had difficulty finding food for themselves and their families since release. To add to these financial woes, almost half of the women (46 percent) were burdened with debt, with the most common forms of debt being supervision fees (23 percent), consumer debt (14 percent), fines (8 percent), and child support (7 percent). After release, men are more likely to owe debts, and the average amount of their debt is higher – \$2,083 versus \$896 among women.<sup>16</sup> While debt among men is driven mostly by supervision fees and child support, men and women are equally likely to carry every other type of debt.

**FAMILY AND COMMUNITY**

In meeting the challenges of reentry, many women turned to family or community for support. This assistance ranged from emotional support and encouragement from family and friends to more tangible resources and services from local agencies and nonprofit service providers.

**FAMILY SUPPORT AND RELATIONSHIPS**  
*Expectations and Post-Release Experiences*

Before release, most women expected to receive some form of support from their families in navigating the reentry process. In general, these expectations were met or exceeded. By eight to ten months after their

release, the majority of women expressed satisfaction with the levels of support they had received from their families. Nearly two-thirds (63 percent) said their family had exceeded their expectations for providing emotional support, half said their family members had exceeded their expectations for providing financial (54 percent) and housing (50 percent) support, and over two-fifths (42 percent) said their family members were more helpful with finding a job than they had expected. It is important to note, however, that nearly a quarter of women (24 percent) reported that their family had not provided the amount of support they had anticipated overall. We find in our predictive analysis that women who reported higher levels of help from their families were less likely to return to prison in the first year following release. However, there does not appear to be a relationship between family support and avoiding drugs and alcohol after release.

When examining which factors predict the extent to which women felt their families were helpful<sup>17</sup> after release, regression analyses revealed that women who were married or living as married prior to prison reported higher levels of family helpfulness one year out, as were those who lived with family in the early months following release. Family relationship quality<sup>18</sup> prior to prison was also a strong predictor of perceived family helpfulness after release. Women who experienced negative family influences after prison—specifically those who lived with people who abused drugs and alcohol—reported that their families were less helpful. Mental health was also associated with lower levels of perceived family helpfulness, with those who experienced depression or other mental health problems reporting that their families were less helpful.

Women were also asked to rate their families in terms of the level of both emotional and tangible (financial or in-kind) support their families provided. As depicted in Table 2, a range of factors were associated with perceived family support in the eight to ten months following release. Older women and those who were married or living with someone in a common-law marriage reported higher levels of support, as did those who participated in prerelease

programming and parenting classes in prison. Women with higher levels of family relationship quality prior to prison, those who corresponded by mail with more family members during their incarceration, and those who lived with family in the early months after their release also reported higher levels of support from families on the outside. Women who reported lower levels of family support were more likely to have been released from state jail and therefore not be on post-release supervision. In addition, women who were more likely to report drawing upon God, religion, or other sources of spirituality for

**Table 2. Predictors of Family Support 8-10 Months Out**

Women who had...	Women who had...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a spouse or common-law partner</li> <li>• extensive histories of substance abuse</li> <li>• lived with family in the early months following release</li> <li>• participated in pre-release programming</li> <li>• more contact with family by mail while in prison</li> <li>• participated in parenting classes in prison</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• exited state jail/not been under post-release supervision</li> <li>• relied upon God, faith, or spirituality to aid in their reentry challenges</li> </ul>
<b>...reported higher levels of family support.</b>	<b>...reported lower levels of family support.</b>

strength in navigating reentry challenges reported lower levels of support from their families. This finding suggests that faith institutions may be serving as surrogates for those whose family members are unable or unwilling to provide them with support.

### **Financial Support**

Family was also a source of financial support for women. Over three-fourths of women (78 percent) had received financial support from family at some point since their release. The average duration of this support was six months.<sup>19</sup> This was significantly longer than the average among men, who reported receiving support from families for 4.5 months on average. This is likely due to lower levels of employment among women as well as a higher



likelihood of working part-time among those who are employed. Among women who received financial support from family, parents were the most likely contributors (58 percent), followed by siblings (41 percent). While men and women were equally likely to receive support from family in general, women were more likely to be supported by an intimate partner (40 percent versus 26 percent) or by a son or daughter (18 percent versus 6 percent). Of mothers of adult children, just over one-fourth (26 percent) reported receiving support from children. The extent of financial support from family, however, was not predictive of other reentry outcomes.

**Emotional Support and Relationship Quality**

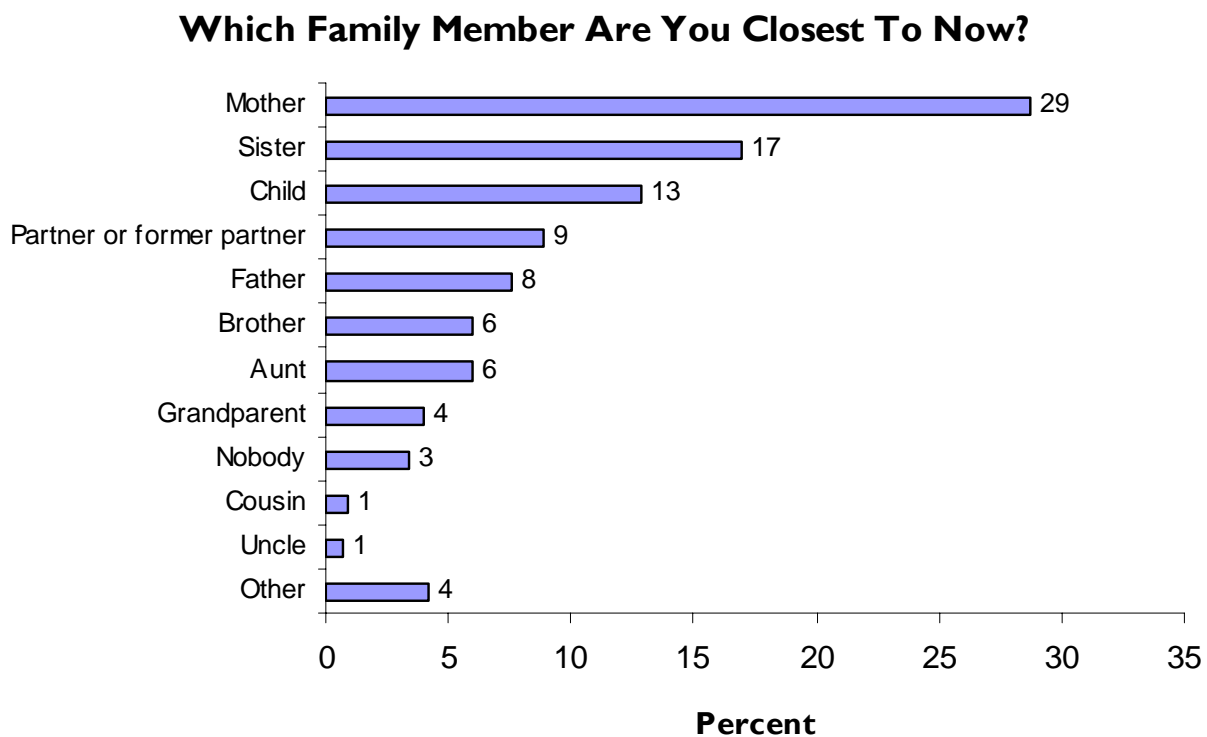
In addition to financial support, most women (83 percent) reported that their families were supportive in emotional terms, such as level of closeness and extent of positive involvement in their lives. A large share of women (85 percent) said that they had strong family relationships, but a significantly smaller share (67 percent) reported having a positive relationship with their partners. While most women reported a substantial amount of emotional support from their families, 22 percent reported high levels of family

conflict.<sup>20</sup> Even in the absence of conflict, many women are subject to negative influence by some family members. Most women reported at least one family member who has had substance abuse problems (71 percent), been convicted of a crime (70 percent), or served time in prison or state jail (65 percent).

**INTIMATE PARTNERS**

When interviewed at eight to ten months following their release, over two-thirds of women (69 percent) reported having a spouse or intimate partner. Two-thirds (67 percent) of women with intimate partners reported having strong relationships,<sup>21</sup> and the vast majority of women with partners (93 percent) said that these partners played a positive role in their lives. However, some women also reported having high levels of conflict with their partners. While only a handful of women reported physical violence or threats, significant shares reported arguments (39 percent) and controlling behavior (27 percent). Nearly half of women with partners reported that their partners had a criminal record (43 percent); smaller shares reported that their partners

Figure 3.



used illegal drugs (15 percent) or abused alcohol (19 percent). As indicated in Figure 3, when asked which family member they are closest to, fewer than ten percent of all women named their partner or spouse. Far greater shares expressed feeling closest to their mothers (29 percent), sisters (17 percent), and children (13 percent).

### **MINOR CHILDREN**

When asked what they were most looking forward to upon release from prison, the single largest response among women was reuniting with children. Young children are likely a particularly compelling motivator for reentry success, and at the time of release roughly half (52 percent) of women were mothers of minor children, with the average mother having two children.<sup>22</sup> Of those with minor children, 67 percent lived with their minor children prior to incarceration and nearly as many (63 percent) were living with their children at eight to ten months after release. About one in seven mothers (13 percent), however, reported having custody problems since release.

Most mothers (81 percent) reported providing financial support to their minor children after release. Mothers also had high rates of attachment to their children as measured by our child attachment scale.<sup>23</sup> As one might expect, attachment was far higher among mothers living with their children.<sup>24</sup> Women were more likely than men to live with their minor children (63 percent versus 34 percent), and their attachment to children on average was significantly higher than that among men in our sample (1.4 compared to 1.2).<sup>25</sup> The number of fathers who had not had any contact with their minor children (16 percent) was nearly twice that of mothers (9 percent). Though fathers had less frequent contact with children, they were more likely than mothers to support their children financially (91 percent versus 80 percent).

### **COMMUNITY PROGRAMS AND SUPERVISION**

When asked about programs, resources, and services that were available to them in the community, women reported a wide range of

options, the most common being AA/NA (56 percent), substance abuse treatment (52 percent), employment skills (42 percent), counseling (37 percent), and job training (28 percent). The majority of women who were offered programs did participate. Women were most likely to be involved in AA/NA (33 percent), employment skills (31 percent), substance abuse treatment (30 percent), and counseling (23 percent). Access to and involvement in programs did not differ significantly between men and women for most programs. Parenting is the only program that was more often offered to women (22 percent versus 12 percent).

To further explore women's reentry needs, we asked them what types of programs and services would still be helpful to them at eight to ten months after release. Women pointed to a variety of program and resource types that would be helpful, indicating a greater need for housing and substance abuse treatment than was expressed by men (see Figure 4).

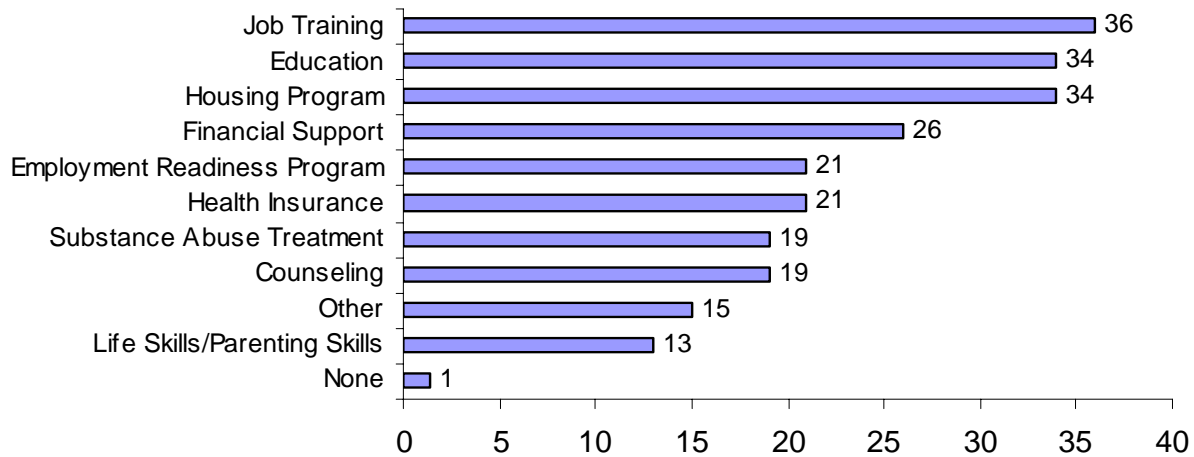
### **SUBSTANCE USE AND TREATMENT**

As described earlier, most women had a history of illegal substance use prior to their most recent prison term. Of those reporting pre-prison substance use, less than a quarter (21 percent) were involved in treatment (including AA/NA) eight to ten months after their release, with average attendance at AA or NA of less than two days per month.<sup>26</sup> Only seven percent of all women were in an intensive inpatient or outpatient treatment program.

Eight to ten months after release, over one-third (36 percent) of the women we interviewed reported using illegal drugs or being intoxicated in the past 30 days. The most commonly used drugs<sup>27</sup> were cocaine (22 percent) and marijuana (21 percent), with seven percent of respondents reporting daily cocaine use. A considerable number of women were heavy users: Nearly one-third (31 percent) of those reporting substance abuse in the past month estimated that they had been intoxicated or used illegal drugs on a daily basis during that time.

Figure 4.

## What Services, Programs, or Support Would Be Useful Now To You?



On average, however, the severity of substance abuse among these women—as measured by a substance abuse scale—was lower after release than before prison. The average level of substance abuse decreased sharply between the six months leading up to their incarceration and the first two to four months following their release, then remained essentially unchanged.

By eight to ten months after release, roughly half (51 percent) of women reported having problems related to their drinking and drug use. The most common difficulties reported were arguments about their substance use (11 percent) and problems with their relationships because of their substance use (10 percent). Smaller, though

important, shares reported difficulties such as arguments at home (7 percent) or physical fights (6 percent) fueled by drinking or drug use, or arrest because of substance use (6 percent).

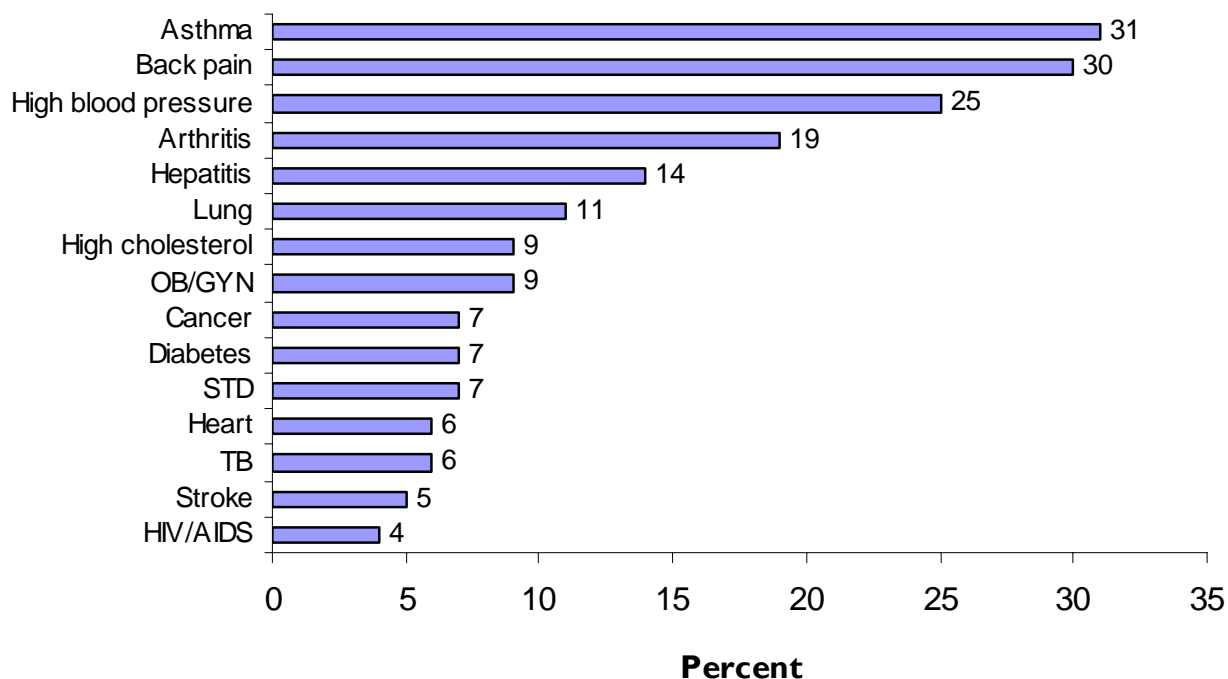
As shown in Table 3, regression analyses of substance abuse outcomes indicated that women who were incarcerated in state jail (and thus not under post-release supervision) and women who were serving time for a drug-related offense were more likely to engage in frequent substance use eight to ten months following their release from prison. Not surprisingly, extensive drug use in the early months following release was the strongest predictor of later substance abuse. Women who participated in prerelease programs while incarcerated and those who were mothers of children under the age of eighteen reported lower levels of substance abuse at eight to ten months following release. Interestingly, women who participated in substance abuse treatment – whether behind bars or in the community – were no more or less likely to engage in substance use at eight to ten months after their release.

Table 3. Predictors of Frequent Drug Use 8-10 Months Out

Women who had...	Women who had...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>participated in pre-release programming</li> <li>minor children</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>most recently served time for a drug offense</li> <li>extensive histories of substance abuse</li> </ul>
...were less likely to use drugs frequently.	...were more likely to use drugs frequently.

Figure 5.

### Self-Reported Physical Health Conditions



### HEALTH

Given that medical issues and co-occurring mental health and addiction problems are prevalent among criminal justice populations, it is surprising that most women (67 percent) rated their health as “good” or “excellent” at eight to ten months after release from prison. This positive view, however, is tempered by the fact that the same share (67 percent) of women reported that they had been diagnosed with some type of chronic health condition. As illustrated in Figure 5, the most commonly reported illnesses were asthma (31 percent), back pain (30 percent), and high blood pressure (25 percent). More than one in five respondents (21 percent) reported having an infectious disease including Tuberculosis, Hepatitis, HIV/AIDS, and other STDs.

Rates of most chronic and infectious diseases were comparable among men and women.

Exceptions were asthma, with women reporting at nearly three times the rate of men (31 percent versus 9 percent) and sexually transmitted diseases, with women reporting infection at a much higher rate than men (7 percent versus 2 percent).

More than half (55 percent) of women reported diagnoses of depression and other mental health problems, and based on a depression scale administered during the course of the postrelease interview, more than one in four (27 percent) were likely suffering from undiagnosed mental illness. Consistent with the literature, mental illness is also closely linked to substance use for this group: Women with mental health problems reported frequent drug use and/or alcohol intoxication<sup>28</sup> at nearly twice the rate of those without mental health problems (30 percent versus 17 percent).

Of those who were under treatment for a physical or mental health condition in prison,

most (92 percent) were provided with a supply of prescription medication upon release, and nearly half (46 percent) were still taking the medication eight to ten months after release. Of those who were no longer taking medication prescribed in prison, the most common reasons given were that they were told by a doctor (16 percent) or had decided for themselves (25 percent) that they no longer needed medication. While a significant share discontinued their medications because they could not afford them (17 percent), few did so because they were unable to gain access to a physician (4 percent).

Overall, nearly half of women (47 percent) were receiving treatment or medication for a physical or mental health condition in the months following their release. Women diagnosed with a physical condition (59 percent) were more likely than those with a mental health condition (38 percent) to be undergoing treatment or taking prescription medication at eight to ten months out. Three-quarters (75 percent) of women had visited a doctor or hospital at least once since release. Nearly half (44 percent) of women who had received medical treatment had visited an emergency room. Nineteen percent were hospitalized in the first eight to ten months after release from prison. While women who had been diagnosed with physical health problems were no more likely than others to be hospitalized or to visit the emergency room, those with infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis, or Hepatitis were twice as likely to use the emergency room (55 percent versus 27 percent) or to be hospitalized (35 percent versus 15 percent).

It is likely that emergency room and other hospital visits represented the only source of healthcare for these women, as most (61 percent) did not have health insurance. Among those with insurance, the most common type was Medicaid (20 percent). Approximately 10 percent of women had received benefits through the Harris County Health District Gold Card program, a local financial assistance program through the Harris County (Texas) Hospital District that provides free or subsidized health care.

## SUPERVISION

The majority (69 percent) of women in this study were released from state jails, for which there are no requirements for post-release supervision. The remaining 31 percent were released to parole or mandatory supervision.<sup>29</sup> Most of these women (28 percent) were still under supervision at eight to ten months after their release. Supervised women were required to comport with a minimum of six conditions of supervision, with the average respondent reporting twelve conditions at the time of release. These conditions include reporting requirements (100 percent), payment of supervision fees (97 percent), and random drug testing (95 percent). Of those under supervision, just over half (58 percent) were required to attend drug or alcohol treatment and 13 percent were required to attend mental health treatment. Supervised women who participated in substance abuse treatment in prison were more likely to have treatment in the community as a parole requirement. However, supervised women with pre-prison histories of substance abuse who did not participate in treatment behind bars were no more likely to participate in post-release treatment than others.

When interviewed at eight to ten months after release, most supervised women (85 percent) said that it had been easy to avoid parole violations, and only 16 percent believed it was likely that they would violate a condition in the future. Nonetheless, more than one-third (36 percent) admitted that they had violated at least one condition since release. The most common violations were being in a place where controlled substances were used (20 percent), failing to attend substance abuse treatment (19 percent), and associating with other criminal offenders (15 percent).

When asked what conditions were hardest to comply with, half (52 percent) of those under supervision responded that none of the conditions were difficult, while others cited meeting with their parole officer (13 percent) and finding employment (11 percent) as the most difficult conditions. At eight to ten

**Table 4. Predictors of Reincarceration One Year After Release**

Women who had...	Women who had...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a high school diploma or GED</li> <li>• a mental health condition</li> <li>• participated in pre-release programming</li> <li>• lived in more than one residence after release</li> <li>• felt their families were helpful to them</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• exited state jail/not been under post-release supervision</li> <li>• participated in substance abuse treatment</li> <li>• extensive histories of substance abuse</li> </ul>
...were less likely to be reincarcerated.	...were more likely to be reincarcerated.

months following release, nearly three quarters (74 percent) of supervised women had seen their parole officer at least once in the month prior to interview. More than one-fourth (27 percent) saw their parole officers several times in that month; however, nearly as many (26 percent) had not seen an officer at all.

Women viewed their parole officers very favorably, with over two-thirds (70 percent) of those under supervision expressing positive views about them.<sup>30</sup> Overall, most women felt that supervision was useful during their transition to the community, with the majority of those interviewed at eight to ten months after release believing that supervision helped them stay crime free (65 percent), drug free (57 percent), and out of prison (60 percent). These favorable views of supervision appear to be based on emotional support rather than on any tangible assistance or referrals provided by parole officers. When asked what their parole officers did that they found most helpful, the most common response (28 percent) was that the officer communicated well and was understanding. An additional 25 percent said the most helpful thing their parole officer did was to provide encouragement. Nearly one in four women (23 percent) reported that their parole officers did nothing that was “most helpful,” and very few felt their officer had been most helpful with practical matters such as finding housing, drug treatment, and employment.

## CRIMINAL ACTIVITY

When asked about whether they had engaged in criminal activity since their release from prison, nearly one in three women (32 percent) reported that they had, with the most common type of crime being drug possession (28 percent). Just under ten percent of women reported dealing drugs, and smaller shares reported other crimes, including auto theft (5 percent), petty larceny (4 percent), and assault (4 percent).

Women reported being arrested in roughly equal shares as those reporting crime, with 35 percent arrested within the eight to ten months following release. The majority (72 percent) of those arrested, however, reported that the reason for arrest was a parole violation as opposed to a new crime. One in four women (25 percent) returned to state prison or state jail within 12 months after release, compared to 14 percent of men. Over half (58 percent) of women were reincarcerated for drug possession, 18 percent for drug distribution, and 9 percent for a property crime. Just under a quarter (24 percent) were reincarcerated for a parole or probation violation based on technical grounds. Overall, women who were released from state prison and subject to parole or mandatory supervision were less likely to return to prison within 12 months than were women released from state jail.

Regression analyses revealed that programming and education were key factors in preventing women from a return to prison (see Table 4). Those who participated in a prerelease program in prison or state jail were less likely to return, as were those with a high school education or GED. Women exiting state prison and under post-release supervision were also less likely to return within a year’s time. In addition, those who moved in the first few months after release were less likely to recidivate, suggesting that these moves represented financial independence gained early in their transition back to the community. Women’s perceptions of family helpfulness

were also a critical protective factor, with the likelihood of return to prison lower for those who felt their families were helpful during their reintegration. Interestingly, women with depression were less likely to recidivate, perhaps because they likely spent more time at home than on the street.

Not surprisingly, substance abuse was the strongest predictor of reincarceration, with the severity of substance use in the early months following release corresponding with a higher likelihood of return to prison. Participation in substance abuse treatment, however, was also predictive of a return to prison. It is likely that those women who participated in treatment had other unmeasured risk factors that made them more susceptible to reoffending. It could also be the case that those women with the most serious (and thus intractable) issues received treatment and therefore the treatment was not effective.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY & PRACTICE**

The research findings presented above describe a population of women who are in dire need of support and resources both behind bars and in the community. Among the reentry challenges they face upon release, their histories of substance abuse feature prominently, serving as the driving factor influencing both post-release substance abuse and return to prison. Substance abuse treatment for these women had no bearing on post-release drug use and was actually predictive of a return to prison, although this could simply reflect the fact that only the most serious cases receive treatment. Clearly women who participate in treatment and continue to use and reoffend have multiple needs and risk factors, some of which may not have been captured in our study. These findings suggest that treatment programs should be reviewed and revised to address women's issues and challenges holistically, with a consideration toward co-occurring disorders, histories of sexual abuse and maltreatment, and the extent and nature of their addiction issues.

Educational and employment readiness deficits represent another set of critical needs for women exiting prison. While similar shares of men and women had a high school diploma or

GED upon entering prison, women were less likely to have worked prior to their incarceration and to have participated in employment programs behind bars. Those who participate in job readiness or vocational training during their confinement, however, are more likely to be employed for a greater percentage of time following their release. An increased focus on educational and employment programs for women in both state jails and prisons could yield positive and meaningful gains in post-release employment and increased financial independence for this population.

For perhaps obvious reasons, most research on prisoner reentry focuses on the challenges and needs of exiting prisoners, such as the drug addiction and educational deficits described above. However, it is equally critical to identify and build upon exiting prisoners' assets, resources, and support systems. For women returning to Houston, those with assets that are likely to lead to post-release success tend to be women who are married, who have minor children, and who have families that are helpful in their transition home. These family ties and support systems are critical to supporting employment and preventing post-release substance use and reoffending.

Compared to men, however, these family relationships can be more tenuous. Pre-release family conferencing is therefore critical in both shoring up valuable family support systems as well as minimizing the tensions and negative influences that are also associated with family relationships. Family conferencing can help exiting prisoners and their family members gain a better understanding of each other's expectations about roles and responsibilities following the prisoner's release. These conversations should include child care responsibilities and custody issues, living arrangements, and financial contributions to the household. They should also provide opportunities for returning prisoners to share their anxieties and personal challenges, to express their remorse for past behaviors, and to articulate the types of both tangible and emotional support they need from their families. Likewise, family members need an

opportunity to explain how the incarceration of their loved one has affected their lives and any limitations or conditions associated with their willingness to support their returning relative.

The burden of supporting the successful return of women from prison to Houston communities rests on many shoulders at both the state and local level. First and foremost, the women themselves need to develop the personal resources and inner will necessary to refrain from drug use and crime. Texas correctional institutions can aid in the development of critical skills and engender an environment supportive of self-betterment through increased access to educational, employment readiness, and pre-release planning programs. They can provide more comprehensive and holistic support for women with substance abuse problems. They can also help identify supportive family members, facilitate conversations with family prior to release, and aid in the identification of alternative community support systems for those women without family. Indeed, the community to which women return has an equally important role to play in reentry success, providing social support through faith-based and non-profit institutions and opening the doors to employment for those with minimal skills and criminal records. Clearly, efforts to support reintegration must be shared by all, as a comprehensive, collaborative approach will likely yield the greatest and most sustainable successes for these women.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Personal communication with Karen Hall, Texas Department of Criminal Justice, November 27, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Interviews were conducted in 2005 by NuStats, Incorporated, an Austin-based survey research firm.

<sup>3</sup> Both the mean and median are 36.

<sup>4</sup> Based on a 4-item substance abuse scale that measured the extent to which substance use had caused problems and behavior changes. The scale ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree and had a Cronbach's reliability of 0.8 across both postrelease interview waves.

<sup>5</sup> Based on the median value. The mean is 8.4 months.

<sup>6</sup> This statistic includes those with Graduate Equivalency Degrees (GEDs).

<sup>7</sup> The survey did not ask what type of illegal activities generated this income.

<sup>8</sup> Based on self-reported data using medians. The mean age among women is 23, among men it is 20.

<sup>9</sup> The mean for both men and women is 4; median is 3 for women, 4 for men.

<sup>10</sup> Offense types are based on TDCJ administrative data.

<sup>11</sup> Based on the median value. The mean value is 10 months.

<sup>12</sup> Administered by the Texas Workforce Commission in collaboration with Local Workforce Development Boards, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ), the Windham School District and The Texas Youth Commission (TYC), Project RIO is designed to provide a link between education, training and employment during incarceration with employment, training and education after release with the ultimate goal of reducing recidivism.

<sup>13</sup> Percentage totals exceed 100 due to rounding errors.

<sup>14</sup> "Working" is defined here as a positive response to the survey question "Are you currently employed?"

<sup>15</sup> Two to four months out, 57 percent of women who were working were working full-time. This percentage dropped to 51 percent at eight to ten months out.

<sup>16</sup> Based on the median value.

<sup>17</sup> Family helpfulness was measured through a series of questions asking respondents to indicate how helpful/unhelpful their family members had been on various aspects of reentry support and assistance, such as providing housing, food, financial support, and childcare.

<sup>18</sup> Family relationship quality was measured through a multi-item scale regarding the respondent's perceived levels of communication with, trust in, and emotional support from family.

<sup>19</sup> Based on the median value. The mean is 6.2 months.

<sup>20</sup> Based on a 3-item family conflict scale measuring the extent to which respondents fought with, disappointed, or were criticized by family members. The scale ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree and had a Cronbach's reliability of 0.7 across all interview waves.

<sup>21</sup> Based on a 13-item partner relationship scale measuring the closeness and quality of respondents' relationship with their partners. The scale ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree and had a Cronbach's reliability of 0.8 across both postrelease interview waves.

<sup>22</sup> Based on the median value. The mean is 1.7.

<sup>23</sup> Seventy-nine percent reported "some attachment" to "high attachment." The 7-item child attachment scale measured how often parents spent time with, placed limits on, or were involved in activities related to their children. The scale ranged from 0 = none of the time to 2 = all of the time and had a Cronbach's reliability of 0.8 and 0.9 across the two postrelease interview waves.

<sup>24</sup> Scale average was 1.6 among parents living with minor children, 1.0 among those who did not.

<sup>25</sup> Child attachment was only measured for parents who reported having been in contact with their children in the past 30 days.

<sup>26</sup> Based on a mean of 1.6 days in response to a question asking how often respondents attended AA/NA in the most recent 30 days.

<sup>27</sup> Percentages reflect a denominator that includes all respondents, including non-users.

<sup>28</sup> "Frequent" drug use or intoxication is defined as drinking to the point of intoxication or using illicit drugs more than once a week.

<sup>29</sup> In Texas, state prisoners can be released through one of three discretionary means: parole, mandatory supervision, and shock probation. Prisoners released through parole and mandatory supervision are subject to post-release supervision under parole. Prisoners released through shock probation are supervised under probation, but this applies to only one percent of releasees and none of the women in our sample.

<sup>30</sup> The 7-item scale measured views about the respondents' parole officers, including whether they perceived the officer to be respectful, professional, and trustworthy. The scale ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree and had Cronbach's reliabilities above 0.7 at both postrelease interviews.