



THE CHALLENGES OF PRISONER REENTRY: FACTS AND FIGURES

One in a Series of Occasional Fact Sheets from the Low-Income Working Families Project

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Every year, millions of men and women leave America's state and federal prisons and local jails with the hope of a successful return to society. In 2005, 698,459 individuals passed through prison gates and an estimated 9 million individuals exited jail.

Many former prisoners return to dependent children. In 2001, prisoners released from state or federal prison were parents to 1.5 million children. There are 3.2 million children if inmates released from jail and on parole are included.

The challenges of prisoner reentry are therefore not experienced by released prisoners alone; they are challenges experienced by families that are predominantly low income.

Returning Prisoners and Their Families

- ***Prisoners rely heavily on their families for housing and support immediately after their release.*** Two months after their release, a strong majority of released prisoners in Maryland (80 percent) and Illinois (88 percent) were living with a family member. Released prisoners are also heavily reliant on their families for financial support. While 25 percent of released prisoners in Cleveland reported receiving financial support from a spouse, family member, or friend before incarceration, 66 percent reported receiving support from a spouse, family member, or friend in the first month after release.
- ***Prisoners generally benefit from returning to their families.*** Twenty-six percent of released prisoners in Cleveland cited "support from family" as the most important factor in staying out of prison, three times those who mentioned employment (8 percent) or housing (7 percent). Previous studies have found that men who returned from prison to live with their wives and children fared much better than those who either lived alone or returned to live with a parent.
- ***Children of released prisoners are an extremely vulnerable population.*** While returning to a family is an important protective factor for released prisoners, children of prisoners may face significantly more vulnerabilities. The loss of a parent at the time of incarceration is a traumatic event for a child. Children often experience a drastic change in their living arrangements after a parent's incarceration. While these changes are most pronounced when the mother is incarcerated, some disruption of the family home environment is likely to occur in all cases of parental incarceration. While a parent is incarcerated, children often lose a substantial amount of financial support. After the parent returns home, reestablishing disrupted parent-child relationships can be difficult. Parents may still have trouble providing financial support for their children, given the employment barriers faced by returning prisoners.

Employment Opportunities

- ***Released prisoners have a hard time finding and maintaining employment in the year following reentry.*** One year after reentry, 37 percent of male prisoners in Cleveland were employed at a full-time job, with an additional 11 percent working part-time. A similar portion, 39 percent, of prisoners returning to the District of Columbia from federal prison were employed either part- or full-time in the year of their release.
- ***Service providers and community leaders consider employment to be the primary factor in a successful reentry.*** Social service providers in Cleveland identified the lack of employment opportunities for returning prisoners as the most important obstacle to a successful reentry. Deviating slightly from this perspective, criminal justice practitioners suggest that the primary barrier is not employment availability, but rather keeping a job. Client unemployment was ranked higher than the lack of affordable housing by social service workers in the District of Columbia as a major problem facing federal prisoners reentering society.
- ***Released prisoners who find employment generally work in low-skill jobs.*** Over a third of employed prisoners returning to Cleveland in 2004 had jobs as manual laborers in the construction industry. They were also concentrated in the food service, wholesale, maintenance and repair, and manufacturing sectors. Social service providers in Cleveland said the decline of manufacturing in Ohio has limited the job possibilities for returning prisoners.
- ***Released prisoners who obtain a job are employed at much lower wages than they earned prior to incarceration.*** Released prisoners in Cleveland who were employed in the year after reentry earned wages that were, on average, less than 82 percent of their wages before incarceration. This decline does not include returning prisoners who remained unemployed (and therefore earned no money from employment), suggesting that the employment income of the average returning prisoner is even lower than 82 percent.

Housing Opportunities

- ***Prisoners have very unstable housing histories after their release.*** Sixty-three percent of released prisoners in Cleveland lived in more than one location in the year following their reentry. Less than half of returning prisoners in Baltimore (48 percent) planned to stay where they were living soon after their release for more than a few months.
- ***Prisoners often live with parents or siblings after release.*** Following release, prisoners in Cleveland were more likely to live with a parent or sibling than they were prior to incarceration, and less likely to live with a spouse or intimate partner than they were prior to incarceration.

Recidivism

- ***Released prisoners have a high probability of being rearrested.*** Nationally, over half of state and federal prisoners released in 1994 (68 percent) were arrested for crimes subsequent to their release, while 52 percent returned to prison within three years of their release. Eighty-three percent of prisoners surveyed in Cleveland had at least one prior conviction, and many reported multiple convictions.
- ***Rearrested prisoners are usually apprehended for parole violations.*** Nationally, the majority of released prisoners who are released and subsequently rearrested are arrested for parole violations, rather than the commission of new crimes.

Sources

Data in this fact sheet are drawn from these Urban Institute publications (except where noted):

- *Prisoners Once Removed: The Impact of Incarceration and Reentry on Children, Families, and Communities*, edited by Jeremy Travis and Michelle Waul (2004);
- “Life After Lockup: Improving Reentry from Jail to the Community,” by Amy L. Solomon, Jenny W. L. Osborne, Stefan LoBuglio, Jeff Mellow, and Debbie Mukamal (2008);
- “Cleveland Stakeholders’ Perceptions of Prisoner Reentry,” by Christy Visher, Tobi Palmer, and Caterina Gouvis Roman (2007);
- “One Year Out: Experiences of Prisoners Returning to Cleveland,” by Christy Visher and Shannon Courtney (2007);
- “Returning Home: Exploring the Challenges and Successes of Recently Released Texas Prisoners,” by Nancy La Vigne, Lisa Brooks, and Tracey Shollenberger (2007);
- “Prison and Jail Inmates at Midyear 2006,” by William J. Sabol, Todd D. Minton, and Paige M. Harrison (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2007);
- “Cleveland Prisoners’ Experiences Returning Home,” by Christy Visher and Shannon M.E. Courtney (2006);
- “The Housing Landscape for Returning Prisoners in the District of Columbia,” by Caterina Gouvis Roman, Michael Kane, and Rukmini Giridharadas (2006); and
- “Returning Home: Understanding the Challenges of Prisoner Reentry, Maryland Pilot Study: Findings from Baltimore,” by Christy Visher, Nancy La Vigne, and Jeremy Travis (2004)

Additional information on prisoner reentry is available on the Urban Institute web site, <http://www.urban.org>.

The Low-Income Working Families project investigates the risks faced by millions of families and their children whose household earnings are insufficient to meet their basic needs. The project applies rigorous research methods and crosscutting expertise, from housing to health care, to identify private and public strategies that can improve these families’ well-being.

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