

ILLINOIS PRISONERS' REFLECTIONS ON RETURNING HOME

Discussed in this Report:

The characteristics, experiences, expectations, and plans of soon-to-be-released prisoners returning to the city of Chicago.

Key Findings: Prisoners returning to Chicago have extensive personal and family histories of criminal involvement and substance abuse. Nonetheless, they are very optimistic about what their lives will be like after release, with most expecting it to be easy to obtain housing and reunite with family members. They also have high expectations about the level of support they will receive from both their parole officers and their family members. Despite the fact that many respondents had been in prison before, most also expected it to be easy to stay out of prison in the future, and very few anticipated engaging in crime or using drugs after their release.

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In 2001, the state of Illinois released 30,068 prisoners to the community, a 157 percent increase since 1983.¹ The sheer number of prisoners being released annually, along with a growing appreciation for the substantial challenges that ex-prisoners face as they reenter society, has brought prisoner reentry—both in Illinois and nationwide—to the forefront of the public agenda. The successful reintegration of prisoners into society is arguably one of the most important components of an effective criminal justice system, yet remarkably little is known about the pathways of prisoner reentry. To address this gap in our knowledge—and to provide an empirical foundation for new policy discussions about ways to improve reentry outcomes for individuals, families and communities—the Urban Institute has launched *Returning Home: Understanding the Challenges of Prisoner Reentry*, a multi-state research project that will inform the new generation of policy and practice.

The phenomenon of prisoner reentry intersects with a number of policy arenas, particularly at the community level. Thus, the *Returning Home* research strategy engages different disciplines and reflects a variety of perspectives, including **individual** characteristics of returning prisoners; the assets and liabilities of returning prisoners' **families**; the relationships of returning prisoners to their **peers**; the strengths and weaknesses of their local **communities**; and **state** corrections programs, policies, and social and economic climates. To address each of these domains, the *Returning Home* study is gathering data on the reintegration process from a number of sources including interviews with prisoners before and after their release from prison; interviews with released prisoners' family members; focus groups with residents in communities to which many prisoners return; analysis of extant data on local indicators of community well-being; interviews with community stakeholders; interviews with state and local officials; and reviews of state laws and sentencing and release policies.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS IN ILLINOIS

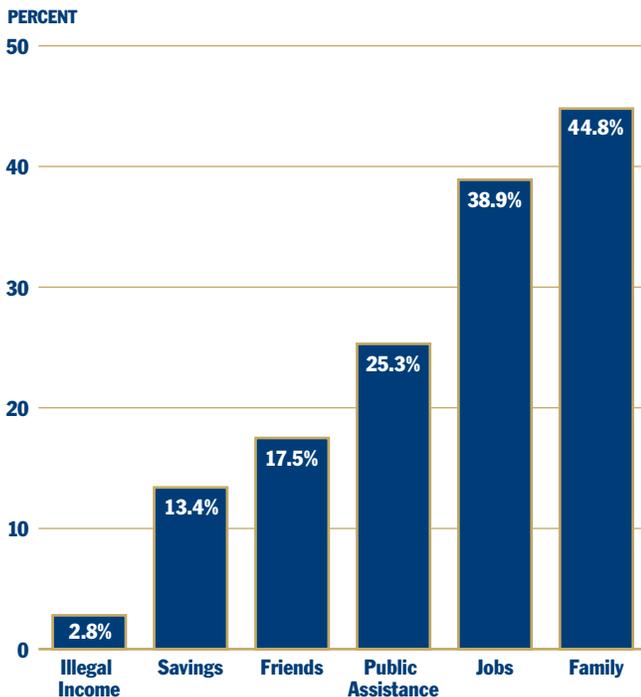
This report is based on analyses of the prerelease surveys of 400 prisoners returning to Chicago. It draws on descriptive statistics regarding respondents' criminal, substance abuse, and employment histories; current health problems; in-prison programming experiences; relationships with family members; and expectations for release. All 400 prisoners who participated in this study were male; 83 percent were black, 5 percent were white, and 12 percent were from other racial groups. Ten percent of the sample was Hispanic. The average age at the time of the prerelease interview was 34 years old.

¹For a detailed description of prisoner reentry in Illinois, please refer to La Vigne, Nancy and Cynthia Mamalian. 2003. *A Portrait of Prisoner Reentry in Illinois*. Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute.

REENTRY DEFINED

The concept of “reentry” is applicable to a variety of contexts in which individuals transition from incarceration to freedom, including release from jails, federal institutions, and juvenile facilities. We have limited our scope to those sentenced to serve time in state prison in order to focus on individuals who have been convicted of the most serious offenses, who have been removed from communities for long periods of time, who would be eligible for state prison programming while incarcerated, and who are managed by state correctional and parole systems.

Expected Sources of Financial Support for 6 Months Post-Release



Source: Urban Institute, 2003.

Criminal justice history/involvement

Most returning prisoners are not new to the criminal justice system. More than three-quarters (78 percent) of the respondents were first arrested at age 18 or younger and about one-third (34 percent) had served time in a juvenile facility. As adults, 87 percent had been convicted more than once; 75 percent had been in prison at least once before; and 61 percent had their parole revoked in the past. Regarding their current prison term, almost half of the sample (46 percent) were convicted of drug offenses, 30 percent were convicted for property crimes, and another 23 percent had been convicted of violent offenses. Furthermore, the majority of the respondents (95 percent) had been admitted to prison for a new crime (includes those on parole), while 5 percent were technical parole violators. The average prison stay was about 18 months, with approximately 60 percent of the respondents serving less than a year.

Education

The majority of returning prisoners had significant educational, vocational, and employment needs. Less than half (41 percent) of the sample had a high school education or higher (i.e., high school diploma, GED, or some college) when they entered prison. During their prison stay, however, the percentage of prisoners with the equivalent of a high school education increased significantly to 49 percent—an 8 percent increase. In addition, respondents expressed an interest in furthering their education after release, with only 9 percent reporting that they did not need or want more education after release.

Employment

Returning prisoners also have significant employment deficits. While almost two-thirds (61 percent) of respondents worked for money prior to incarceration, 60 percent reported that at least some of their income came from illegal activity, including 29 percent who indicated that all or most of their income was illegal. Once incarcerated, less than half of the sample (44 percent) held an in-prison job (mostly low-skill jobs, such as cooking, janitorial, or laundry services). Despite their limited employment histories, almost all respondents (96 percent) felt that finding a job after release was important and 87 percent felt that a job was important in staying out of prison. Fourteen percent already had a job lined up for after

prison at the time of the prerelease interview. Of those who did not have a job at that point, the most popular method for finding one was to use newspaper ads (67 percent), followed by talking to their parole agent (62 percent), and talking to relatives and friends (60 percent).

Financial support

Prisoners reported little in the way of financial resources to support themselves upon release. Only 13 percent of the respondents in our sample had a savings account to draw from once they left the prison gates. As for the rest, financial independence was an immediate challenge. Unless they have a job waiting on the outside, ex-prisoners are left to depend on family, friends, and public assistance until they get on their feet. Prior to this prison term, the most frequently reported sources of financial support were job(s) (54 percent), illegal income (40 percent), and family members (33 percent). Families (45 percent) and jobs

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PRISONER REENTRY IN ILLINOIS

Between 1970 and 2001, Illinois' prison population rose 505 percent, from 7,326 to 44,348 inmates, reflecting a dramatic jump in drug-law violations, a steady increase in convictions for violent offenses, and a significant increase in parole revocations of released prisoners. Along with the rise in its prison populations, Illinois is experiencing a tremendous increase in the annual number of releases. In 2001, the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) released 30,068 inmates, a 157 percent increase since 1983 (11,715 inmates released).

Government leaders, corrections officials, local organizations, and service providers are keenly aware of the reentry challenges in Illinois, and they are using both research and programmatic knowledge to address them. In 2002, the IDOC was awarded \$2 million from the U.S. Department of Justice (Office of Justice Programs) as part of the federal government's *Going Home* initiative, which supports state-run reentry programs nationwide. This recent grant provides the opportunity for Illinois to continue and expand upon current reentry initiatives in the state, specifically in the North Lawndale community of Chicago, which has one of the highest concentrations of ex-offenders in the state and will serve as a pilot for statewide reentry programming.² In addition, Illinois Governor Rod R. Blagojevich recently announced the reopening of the Sheridan Correctional Center scheduled for January 2004. This facility will offer substance abuse treatment to inmates and represents an important step to help reduce drug-related recidivism, as well as drug-related victimizations in the community. Other organizations and agencies in Illinois have also made reentry an important item on their agendas. These organizations include the Safer Foundation, Treatment Alternatives for Safe Communities (TASC), the Chicago Alliance for Neighborhood Safety (CANS), Project JOBS, and the Illinois Workforce Advantage Program.

These various efforts in Illinois are positive steps toward improving reentry outcomes at the state level and in the city of Chicago, the most critical reentry location in the state. The premise of these programs is that a well-designed reentry system can enhance public safety, reduce returns to prison, control corrections expenditures, and help prisoners achieve successful long-term reintegration. In other words, these efforts could result in positive outcomes not only for the individual returning home, but also for their families and communities. The results of *Returning Home*, in conjunction with these other projects, will be valuable in achieving these goals.

²Daniel Dighton. 2002. The Challenge of Reentry: Keeping Ex-offenders Free. *The Compiler* (summer). Chicago: Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

The study design in Illinois entails three separate data collection efforts with 400 male prisoners returning to the city of Chicago: (1) a self-administered survey given to groups of prisoners 30 to 60 days prior to their release; (2) a one-on-one interview with sample members 45 to 60 days after release; and (3) a second one-on-one interview at four to six months after release. Our goal is to capture each respondent's life circumstances immediately prior to and following their release from prison, as well as several months into their reintegration within the community. Thus, the surveys and interviews explore various reentry expectations, needs, and experiences, such as those related to prerelease preparation, postrelease housing and employment, and the renewal of personal relationships.

Prisoners were recruited over a 5-month period through the use of a preexisting reentry program known as PreStart. The Illinois Department of Correction (IDOC) requires the vast majority of prisoners to complete this two-week prerelease program, which convenes groups of 10 to 30 prisoners in a classroom setting. We scheduled a time during regular PreStart program hours to explain the study and distribute a self-administered survey to those willing to participate. This strategy resulted in a participation rate of 76 percent and the resulting sample was representative of all releases for the year based on factors such as major offense, admission type, release reason, security level, time served, as well as demographic characteristics such as race and age.

(39 percent) were the most frequently reported sources of expected financial support after release. Very few (3 percent) indicated that they would continue to pursue support through illegal means.

Just over half (57 percent) thought that it would be *pretty easy* or *very easy* to support themselves after release, and 23 percent reported that it would be *pretty hard* or *very hard* to provide themselves with food after release. Eleven percent did not expect any financial support during their first month out of prison.

Substance Abuse

Substance abuse was prevalent among this sample. Sixty-six percent reported some drug use and 48 percent reported having drunk to the point of intoxication in the six months prior to their current prison term. Of the drug users, 22 percent reported using heroin on a daily basis, 15 percent reported using cocaine on a daily basis, and 25 percent reported using marijuana on a daily basis. Despite this extensive abuse, only 2 percent of respondents reported participating in a specific drug or alcohol treatment program, 8 percent reported having attended Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous (AA/NA), and 10 percent reported participating in both during prison. Furthermore, 17 percent reported it likely they would use drugs after release if they knew they would not get caught, and 12 percent said they would do so even if they would be arrested for it. Clearly, many of these prisoners will be returning to their communities with unresolved substance abuse problems.

Health

Prisoners had positive views of their health. In this sample of prisoners, 86 percent rated their overall health as good (42 percent) or excellent (44 percent). Sixteen percent were currently on medications, with the majority being treated for diseases such as asthma and high blood pressure. Most (86 percent) thought that it would be *pretty easy* or *very easy* for them to stay in good health postprison. Yet, almost three-quarters (74 percent) of the respondents reported that they would need help getting health care after prison. Nonetheless, 42 percent thought that access to health care was important in staying out of prison.

Gang involvement

A significant share of returning prisoners reported past or current gang involvement. Thirty percent claimed to be involved with a gang prior to their current prison term. Of these, more than 90 percent were in a gang for more than three years and one-third *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that they were very loyal to fellow gang members. However, gang involvement steadily decreased during incarceration (14 percent) and even fewer prisoners (5 percent) expected to be affiliated with gangs after release.

Family relationships and support

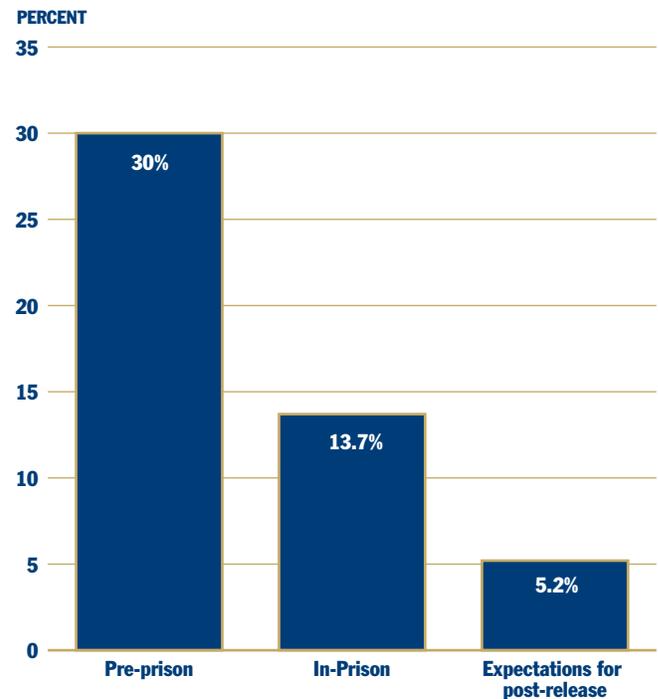
Family was a very important source of support for prisoners, both during prison and regarding their expectations for after release. Almost all of the prisoners (94 percent) wanted their families to be involved in their lives during prison. Furthermore, 86 percent reported that they felt close to their families during their prison stay and despite the limitations posed by confinement, 76 percent of the respondents considered themselves to be a source of support to their families while they were in prison.

However, many of these families also had serious problems with the criminal justice system, substance abuse, or both. Fifty-nine percent of the respondents had at least one family member who had been convicted of a crime, and almost one-third (31 percent) had a family member who was currently in prison. Furthermore, 58 percent reported that someone in their family had problems with drugs or alcohol. While these issues most likely do not affect all family members, other research has shown that an individual who has family members who are also engaged in deviant or criminal activity have an increased propensity to engage in criminal activities themselves.

More than half the prisoners (58 percent) had never been married. Twelve percent reported being divorced or separated, 10 percent were married, and 11 percent were never married but were living with their partner prior to this prison term. Many of these prisoners also left children behind. Sixty-one percent had children under 18 years old, and another 12 percent had grown children. Of those with children, 46 percent lived with some of their minor children and 79 percent provided financial support to these children before prison.

Gang involvement steadily decreased during incarceration (14 percent) and even fewer prisoners (5 percent) expected to be affiliated with gangs after release

Percent of Respondents Reporting Gang Membership



Source: Urban Institute, 2003.

RETURNING HOME: UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGES OF PRISONER REENTRY

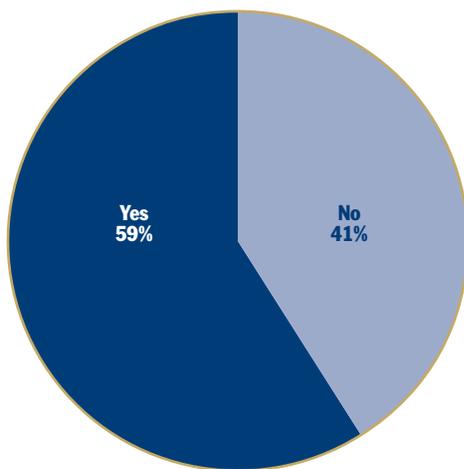
The *Returning Home* study is being conducted in four states in two phases. Phase I is a pilot study with reduced sample sizes and a shorter study timeline, and Phase II involves full implementation of the research design based on lessons learned from Phase I. Based on a number of criteria, including quality and availability of data, and variation in sentencing and release practices, we selected Maryland for the pilot study and Illinois, Ohio, and Texas as the three states in which the full research study will be conducted. The project is being carried out in close collaboration with corrections officials, policymakers, researchers, and community leaders in each of the states. Data collection has already been completed in Maryland and is currently under way in Illinois, with support from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Woods Fund of Chicago, the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC), and the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority (ICJIA).

Prisoners were optimistic about relations with family members after release. More than three-quarters (77 percent) thought that it would be easy to renew family relationships. Eighty-six percent also expected their families to be supportive after their release. Indeed, most prisoners (72 percent) expected to live with their family members after prison and family members (45 percent) were the most frequently reported source of postprison financial support. Of respondents who were parents, 78 percent thought that it would be easy to renew relationships with their children, yet only 56 percent expected to live with some of their children upon release.

Housing

Securing postprison housing did not present itself as a challenge to most returning prisoners. At the time of the prerelease interview, 69 percent had prearranged housing following release from prison. Most (72 percent) expected to live with a family member. Of the 31 percent who did not yet have housing lined up, the most common method for trying to find housing was to contact a family member (40 percent), followed by using a referral service/housing program (28 percent), contacting a parole agent (25 percent), checking the newspaper (22 percent), and contacting a shelter (20 percent). Sixty-two percent of these prisoners who did not have housing lined up thought that it would be *pretty easy* or *very easy* to find a place to live.

Has Anyone in Your Family Been Convicted of a Crime?



Source: Urban Institute, 2003.

Postrelease supervision

The state will continue to supervise most of these prisoners upon release. According to respondents in our study, 83 percent expected to be under parole or community supervision postprison, which mirrors the overall supervision rate for 2001. An additional 8 percent were not sure whether or not they would be supervised. Of those who knew they would be under parole supervision, 83 percent expected their parole officer to be helpful with their transition back to the community. Two-thirds (66 percent) thought that it would be *pretty easy* or *very easy* to avoid a parole violation.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

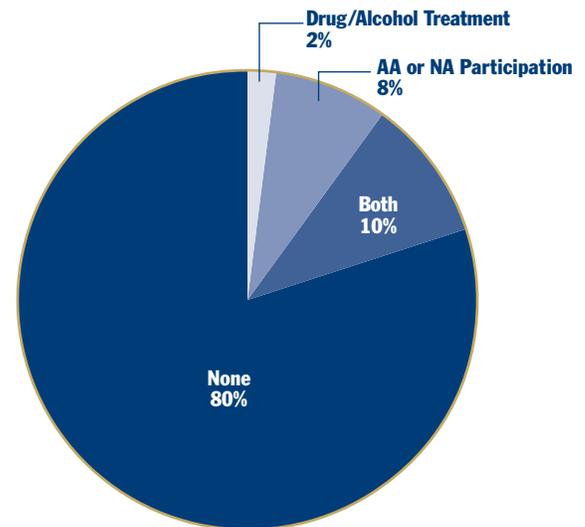
The design of the *Returning Home* study is intended both to build new knowledge about the pathways of reentry and to facilitate policy discussions at the local, state, and national levels. Thus far, the findings from the Illinois *Returning Home* prerelease survey highlight several policy implications:

- Soon-to-be-released prisoners in our sample, who averaged 34 years of age, had long, serious histories of substance abuse and criminal justice involvement. Almost half had been convicted of a drug offense this prison term. Only 20 percent had participated in a program for drug or alcohol problems, suggesting that many prisoners will return to the community with persisting addictions which, if not addressed, could lead to subsequent substance abuse and criminal involvement.
- About half of the prisoners are leaving prison with poor educational qualifications and only 14 percent of the prisoners had postprison jobs lined up at the time of the prerelease survey. Employment readiness and referral services, therefore, are critical resources for these returning prisoners.
- Prisoners generally remain close to their families during incarceration. Prisoners also expect to rely on family members for housing and financial support during the first month out of prison. For these reasons, prisons should incorporate families into their prerelease programming and postrelease supervision.
- Six in ten prisoners have children under age 18. While prisons remove parents from their children, they also afford opportunities to prepare inmates for renewing their relationships with their children, including how to provide emotional and financial support after release.
- Gang involvement decreased during incarceration and is likely to decrease further, based on respondents' expectations of gang participation after their release. Thus, efforts on the part of prison officials to encourage prisoners to leave behind their gang status could have positive implications for successful reintegration.

In addition to this research brief, we will be developing topic-specific research summaries to inform policy and practice about prisoner reentry. We will also produce a full technical report, including analyses of all pre- and postrelease data from prisoners and their families, postrelease criminal history data, and findings from the interviews with community leaders and focus groups with community residents. This final report, which will be published in 2004, will present the conclusions from the study and discuss policy implications. The results of the Illinois study will also be a part of a larger cross-state analysis based on *Returning Home* research conducted in Maryland, Ohio, and Texas.

83 percent expected their parole officer to be helpful with their transition back to the community.

Participation in Substance Abuse Treatment During Prison



Source: Urban Institute, 2003.

For Further Reading

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