



URBAN INSTITUTE
Justice Policy Center
2100 M Street NW
Washington, DC 20037
<http://justice.urban.org>

Returning Home Illinois Policy Brief

Employment and Prisoner Reentry

By Vera Kachnowski

Prepared for the Illinois Criminal Justice
Information Authority
August 2005

Returning Home: Understanding the Challenges of Prisoner Reentry is a longitudinal study of prisoner reentry in Maryland, Illinois, Ohio, and Texas. *Returning Home* explores the phenomenon of prisoner reentry within five domains: (1) the individual experience, as documented through interviews with prisoners before and after release from prison; (2) the family experience, as documented through interviews with family members of returning prisoners; (3) the peer group experience, as documented through prisoner interviews both before and after their release; (4) the community experience, as documented through interviews with key community stakeholders and focus groups with residents; and (5) the broader policy environment at the state level. In Illinois, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Woods Fund of Chicago, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, and the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority supported *Returning Home*. The Metro Chicago Information Center (MCIC) conducted the original data collection, under the expert direction of Dr. Alisú Schoua-Glusberg.

This report was supported by Grant 02-DB-BX-0017 awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice, through the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority. Points of view or opinions contained within this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice, or the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority.

Finding employment is one of the most important reintegration challenges ex-prisoners face after release, and one that can have a significant impact on their chances of remaining crime-free. Prior research shows that finding and maintaining a legitimate job after release can reduce the chances of reoffending following release from prison, especially for older offenders.¹ Research also shows that the higher the wages, the less likely persons released from prison will return to crime.²

Although two-thirds of former prisoners report that they held a job just prior to their incarceration, most prisoners experience great difficulties finding jobs after their release.³ During the time they spend in prison, individuals lose work skills, forfeit the opportunity to gain work experience, and sever interpersonal connections and social contacts that could lead to legal employment opportunities upon release.⁴ And, while the period of incarceration could be viewed as an opportunity to build skills and prepare for placement at a future job, the evaluation literature provides mixed support for the effectiveness of in-prison job training programs.⁵ After release, the stigma of their ex-prisoner status makes the job search even more difficult: a recent survey of 3,000 employers in four major metropolitan areas revealed that two-thirds of the employers would not knowingly hire an ex-prisoner.⁶

This policy brief draws on employment data gathered as part of the *Returning Home* study through interviews with 400 male Illinois prisoners before and up to three times after their release.⁷ We present findings on pre- and in-prison employment training and experiences as well as postrelease employment outcomes among released prisoners who returned to Chicago. We also detail the characteristics of successful job seekers and briefly discuss the policy implications.

PREPRISON EMPLOYMENT EXPERIENCES

The majority of respondents in our sample had some employment experience before entering prison most recently, although it was often inconsistent and supplemented by illegal income. During the six months before entering prison, sixty percent of respondents were employed for at least some amount of time, most commonly at food service, construction, or maintenance jobs. Respondents who held preprison jobs reported hourly pay ranging from \$1.50 to \$50, with a median of \$8.50.⁸ About three-quarters (76 percent) of those who held jobs said their main job⁹ had a regular schedule, and two-thirds (66 percent) of those who were employed worked 40 or more hours at their main job. Sixty percent of all respondents—including those with legitimate employment—reported that some or all of their income during the six months before they entered prison came from illegal activity. In terms of lifetime employment history, about one-third (34 percent) of respondents reported having been fired from a job at least once before.

IN-PRISON PROGRAMMING AND WORK EXPERIENCE

During the time they spent in prison, some respondents participated in programs aimed at improving job skills and educational levels. About 31 percent of respondents reported having participated in an employment readiness program while in prison, while much smaller shares of respondents participated in job training programs (9 percent) or work release jobs (9 percent). Forty-two percent of respondents reported holding an in-prison job. As far as educational programming, 9 percent of respondents participated in a GED program during their time in prison, with 4 percent completing and earning a GED. About one quarter (24 percent) of respondents reported wanting to take a class but not being able to and the majority of these respondents indicated that they were not incarcerated long enough to

be eligible to participate in a desired program. Of the respondents who reported participating in a prerelease program¹⁰, 79 percent said that job search strategies were covered during the program and a third (32 percent) reported that a job referral was provided.

EXPECTATIONS FOR FINDING EMPLOYMENT

Most respondents were hoping to find jobs after release but also expected to experience some difficulty doing so. At the time of the prerelease interview, nearly all respondents (96 percent) *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that it was very important to them to find a job after their release, and the majority (87 percent) thought that having a job would be important in helping them stay out of prison. At the same time, respondents generally expected *finding* a job to be *pretty hard* or *very hard* (59 percent). By contrast, most respondents (86 percent) expected *keeping* a job to be *pretty easy* or *very easy*. Ninety-two percent of respondents said they wanted *some help* or *a lot of help* finding a job after release. In addition, 89 percent of respondents said they wanted *some help* or *a lot of help* getting job training after release.

LOOKING FOR EMPLOYMENT AFTER RELEASE

The majority of respondents who did not already have jobs lined up before release spent time looking for work once back in the community. Respondents used a variety of methods to look for jobs after release. The two most common methods currently employed respondents used to find their jobs involved personal connections: at over a year after release one-third each of those currently employed talked to friends and relatives to find their job. At all postrelease data collection points, about two-thirds of all respondents reported that their criminal record had affected their job search to some degree. However, roughly three-quarters of currently employed respondents reported that their employer knew

about their criminal history at the time they were hired.

POSTRELEASE EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES

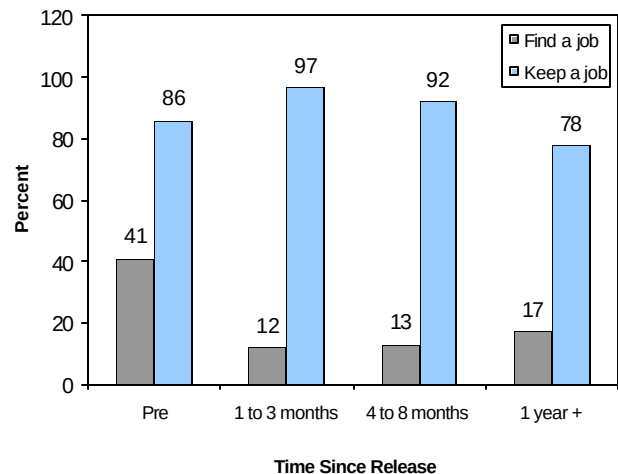
Very few respondents reported working during the first few months after their release from prison. Among those interviewed one to three months after release,¹¹ only 20 percent said they had worked for at least one week. Respondents had somewhat more success as they spent more time in the community. Of the respondents who were interviewed four to eight months after release,¹² 44 percent said they had worked for at least one week since release. Less than a third (30 percent) of respondents were employed at the time of that interview, and just 24 percent of all respondents were employed full-time (40-plus hours per week). Among respondents interviewed more than a year after release,¹³ 49 percent reported having worked at least one week since release, but just 28 percent were employed at the time of interview (24 percent full-time). At all postrelease data collection points, the majority (over 85 percent) of employed respondents were working at just one job; common job types included construction/labor, maintenance, and warehouse work/shipping.

EMPLOYMENT EXPECTATIONS AND REALITIES

While more respondents were able to find work as time progressed, they also reported that finding a job was much harder than they had expected—and their expectations at the prerelease interview had not been very high. As shown in figure 1, less than half of respondents interviewed before release expected that finding a job would be easy. After release, less than a fifth of respondents reported that finding a job after release had been easy. With regards to keeping a job, respondents had higher expectations at the prerelease interview—86 percent expected keeping a job to be easy. When we asked those who had found a job

whether it was easy to keep it, the majority agreed it was (see figure 1).

Figure 1. Percentage of respondents agreeing it would be/has been easy to find and keep a job after release



JOB SATISFACTION

At all postrelease data collection points, most employed respondents were satisfied with their jobs and *agreed* or *strongly agreed* with several statements measuring work satisfaction. The majority (over 80 percent) of employed respondents reported that they got along with their supervisors, liked the work they were doing, got along with their coworkers, and were treated fairly by their supervisors. Over two-thirds of employed respondents thought the job would give them better opportunities in the future and would be happy to have their current job “a year from now.” On the other hand, nearly two-thirds (65 percent) of respondents interviewed at the first two data points reported that they were not happy with the amount of pay they were receiving for their work, with the average hourly pay being \$9 per hour. Among those currently employed over a year after release, about one half (51 percent) were not satisfied with their pay; the average wage was \$9.60 per hour.

Table 1. Predictors of Weeks Worked after Release

Those who had...	Those who had...
• Worked pre-prison • More prior convictions • Work release jobs in prison • Debts after release • Good perception of neighborhood for finding a job	• Negative peer influences before prison • High numbers of prior parole revocations • No intimate partner relationships after release • Used drugs or alcohol to intoxication after release • Assessed drug selling to be a problem in their neighborhood
...worked more weeks after release.	...worked fewer weeks after release.

CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL JOB SEEKERS

Respondents who were and were not currently employed full-time (40-plus hours) when interviewed at four to eight months after release differed significantly with regard to several personal characteristics, pre- or in-prison experiences and postrelease circumstances.¹⁴ Specifically, respondents who were employed full-time were more likely to have worked before prison than those who were not employed full-time, and were more likely to think their postrelease neighborhood was a good place to find a job. Respondents who were nonwhite, who had many prior parole revocations and who scored highly on a Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Scale were less likely to be employed full-time at four to eight months after release.

We also considered the factors that predicted a greater number of weeks worked postrelease (see table 1 above). Once again, respondents who had worked before prison and those who thought their neighborhood was a good place to find a job worked more weeks after release than those who did not work before prison or think good job opportunities existed in their areas. In addition, respondents who held work release jobs while in prison and those who had debts after release worked more weeks after release than those who did not. Surprisingly, respondents who had more prior convictions worked more weeks after release than those with fewer prior convictions. On the other hand,

respondents who had many negative peer influences before prison, those who had no intimate partner relationship after release, those who reported drug use or intoxication after release, those who thought drug selling was a problem in their neighborhoods, and those with high number of prior parole revocations worked fewer weeks after release than their counterparts.

SUMMARY

These findings shed some light on the preparation of soon-to-be-released prisoners to reenter the workforce after release and their actual employment experiences once back in the community. Most respondents in our sample entered prison with some employment experience, typically at low-paying jobs that they did not keep for long periods of time and often supplemented with illegal income. During the time they spent in prison, small shares (less than a third) of respondents participated in programming aimed at improving education levels and job skills. All respondents spent time in a prerelease program and the majority reported that finding employment was covered in the program. Even while they were still in prison, less than half of respondents thought it would be easy to find a job after release and the vast majority wanted help in locating employment and securing job training after release.

Indeed, in the first few months after release, very few respondents were employed for any period of time. Those who were employed held

mostly low-skilled, low-paying jobs. Over time, more respondents found jobs for at least some period of time, although the job types remained the same. Nonetheless, those who were employed at each interview period expressed satisfaction with their jobs in every area but pay.

The characteristics of successful job seekers and those who worked more weeks after release point to some policy implications. For instance, work release jobs predicted more weeks worked after release. This suggests that expanding work release programs to more participants might increase workforce participation after release. In addition, personal circumstances after release, such as drug and alcohol use and post-traumatic stress disorder, appear to impede employability among recently released prisoners, suggesting that these problems must be addressed before full employment can be achieved. It is clear that employment remains a key challenge for ex-prisoners who return to Chicago and one that they would like help in overcoming.

END NOTES

¹ Christopher Uggen. 2000. Work as a Turning Point in the Life Course of Criminals: A Duration Model of Age, Employment, and Recidivism. *American Sociological Review* (65), 529-546. Robert Sampson and John Laub. 1997. A Life-course Theory of Cumulative Disadvantage and the Stability of Delinquency. *Advances in Criminological Theory* (7), 133-161; Miles Harer. 1994. Recidivism of Federal Prisoners Released in 1987. Washington, D.C.: Federal Bureau of Prisons, Office of Research and Evaluation; Robert Sampson and John Laub. 1993. *Crime in the Making: Pathways and Turning Points through Life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

² Jared Bernstein and Ellen Houston. 2000. Crime and Work: What We Can Learn from the Low-wage Labor Market. Washington, D.C.: Economic Policy Institute; Jeff Grogger. 1998. Market Wages and Youth Crime. *Journal of Labor Economics* (16), 759-91.

³ James Lynch and William Sabol. 2001. *Prisoner Reentry in Perspective*. Crime Policy Report. Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute.

⁴ Bruce Western, Jeffrey Kling, and David Weiman. 2001. The Labor Market Consequences of Incarceration. *Crime and Delinquency* (47) 410-27; Robert Sampson and John Laub. 1997. A Life-course Theory of Cumulative

Methodology

The *Returning Home: Illinois* study involved a series of personal interviews with a representative sample of 400 soon-to-be released male prisoners who were planning to live in Chicago. All of the prisoners who participated in the Illinois study were male. Most (83 percent) were black, 5 percent were white, and 12 percent were from other racial groups. Ten percent of the sample was Hispanic and the average age at the time of the prerelease interview was 34. Most respondents had extensive criminal histories, with 87 percent having been convicted more than once. Regarding the current prison term, almost half of the sample (46 percent) had been convicted of drug offenses, 30 percent were convicted for property crimes, and 23 percent had been convicted of violent offenses. The average prison stay was about 18 months, with approximately 60 percent of the respondents serving less than a year in prison.

Respondents were surveyed once in prison and three times following their release. The interview covered a range of topic areas that are hypothesized to affect reintegration success, including attitudes and beliefs, criminal history, employment, family support, health challenges, housing, and substance use. These self-reported data were combined with official records of criminal recidivism to further understand the factors that contribute to a successful (or unsuccessful) reentry. The findings presented in this research brief are based on data collected at the prerelease interview (n = 400), four to eight months after release (n = 205), and 16 months after release (n = 198).

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⁵ Shawn Bushway and Peter Reuter. 2001. Labor Markets and Crime. In J. Petersilia and J. Wilson (eds.) *Crime*. ICS Press; Gerald Gaes, Timothy Flanagan, Laurence Motiuk, and Lynn Stewart. 1999. Adult Correctional Treatment. In M. Tonry and J. Petersilia (eds.) *Prisons*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; David Wilson, Catherine Gallagher, Mark Coggeshall, and Doris MacKenzie. 1999. A Quantitative Review and Description of Corrections-Based Education, Vocation, and Work Programs. *Corrections Management Quarterly* 3 (4), 8-18.

⁶ Harry Holzer, Stephen Raphael, and Michael Stoll. 2004. Will Employers Hire Former Offenders? : Employer Preferences, Background Checks, and Their Determinants. In B. Western, M. Patillo, D. Weiman

(eds.) *Imprisoning America: The Social Effects of Mass Incarceration*. New York, NY: The Russell Sage Foundation.

⁷ For more information about study methodology and respondent characteristics, see Nancy La Vigne, Christy Visser, and Jennifer Castro. 2004. *Chicago Prisoners' Experiences Returning Home*. Policy Brief. Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute. Available at: <http://www.urban.org/url.cfm?ID=311115>.

⁸ Ninety-seven percent of respondents who worked in the six months pre-prison reported hourly wages between \$1 and \$50. Five outliers greater than \$50 per hour were excluded from the analysis.

⁹ "Main job" is that for which the respondent worked the most hours, on average.

¹⁰ All respondents in our sample were recruited through PreStart, a mandatory two-week pre-release program administered to prisoners scheduled to be released in the next one to 12 months and who will be supervised after release.

¹¹ N = 264

¹² N = 205

¹³ N = 197. Significant differences were found on a few key data measures between respondents who were and were not interviewed about a year after release. To adjust for these differences, our analysis relies on a weighted database.

¹⁴ These predictive findings described in this section are based on a multivariate regression analysis.