

CHICAGO COMMUNITIES AND PRISONER REENTRY

KEY FINDINGS

- Over half (54 percent) of former male prisoners released to Chicago returned to just 7 of Chicago's 77 community areas.
- Forty-five percent of ex-prisoners said that they did not return to the neighborhood they lived in before they were sent to prison, primarily because they wanted to avoid problems in their old neighborhood or because their family had moved.
- Former prisoners who resided in neighborhoods that were perceived as unsafe and where drug selling was a problem were more likely to use drugs, were less likely to be employed, and were more likely to return to prison.
- Community residents, reentry policymakers and practitioners,

(Continued on page 2)

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When men and women leave prison and return home, they are confronted with an array of challenges, such as securing stable living arrangements, finding employment, and avoiding criminal activity. Perhaps a less obvious factor that may affect their success is the nature of the *place* to which they return, specifically the local community area or neighborhood and its distinctive characteristics. Both the availability and cost of housing and the availability and proximity of jobs in areas where ex-prisoners return may influence postrelease outcomes. Accessibility of social services, such as health care and substance abuse treatment, is also likely to affect their reentry experience and subsequent recidivism. Indeed, for many ex-prisoners, the community plays an important role in their reintegration.¹

PROFILE OF FORMER PRISONERS RETURNING TO CHICAGO

- Initial sample consisted of 400 men, with a median age of 34 years.
- Eighty-three percent of respondents were black, 5 percent were white, and the remaining 12 percent identified with other racial groups. Ten percent of respondents were Hispanic.
- Nearly half (46 percent) had a drug offense as their most serious charge for their current prison term, while one-fifth (21 percent) were serving time for violent offenses, such as assault and robbery, and one-third (30 percent) were in prison for property offenses such as burglary and theft. The median time served was 18 months.
- Most respondents (87 percent) had at least one prior conviction, with 35 percent reporting four or more prior convictions. Three-quarters (74 percent) had served time in prison before, and one-third (34 percent) had spent time in a juvenile correctional facility.
- The majority (66 percent) reported some drug use prior to prison, with marijuana, heroin, and cocaine the most common drugs.
- Less than half (49 percent) had high school diplomas before entering prison and one-third (34 percent) had been fired from a job at least once.
- Just over half (51 percent) were single and had never been married, and 60 percent had children under the age of 18.

KEY FINDINGS*(Continued from page 1)*

and ex-prisoners believe that the Chicago communities receiving men and women released from prison are unprepared and lack needed services for this population.

- Community residents and reentry policymakers and practitioners suggested that parole officers would better serve former prisoners and their communities if they had smaller caseloads and provided a combination of supportive services and close supervision.
- Chicago neighborhoods receiving former prisoners could benefit from some community development assistance, including building coalitions of local organizations, securing additional resources, and engaging local residents in the process.

Likewise, residents and stakeholders in the communities to which these former prisoners return experience various concerns, from fear of increased criminal activity to the challenges of providing sufficient jobs, housing, and other support for this population. Families may experience diverse reactions when a family member returns from incarceration. Further, high rates of incarceration of residents in a neighborhood coupled with high concentrations of former prisoners may weaken the ability of the community to perform traditional social functions.² Ultimately, community members must often manage a delicate balance between feeling fearful and mistrustful of returning prisoners and providing social support and services for them.

This research brief describes the community context facing persons released from prison using data gathered in a study of prisoner reentry in Chicago, Illinois. In 2002, the Urban Institute launched a longitudinal study of prisoner reentry entitled *Returning Home: Understanding the Challenges of Prisoner Reentry*. The study involved several data sources:

- a series of interviews with male prisoners returning to Chicago, once before and up to three times after their release (see sidebar, “Profile of Former Prisoners Returning to Chicago”);

- focus groups with residents in four Chicago community areas that are home to the highest concentrations of returning prisoners; and
- interviews with persons involved in prisoner reentry activities at the community and city levels, representing local service providers, law enforcement and corrections agencies, and city government. In this report, we refer to this latter group as reentry policymakers and practitioners. (See sidebar “*Returning Home Study Methodology*” for more details about the data collection.)

This brief brings together the perspectives of former prisoners, community residents, and reentry policymakers and practitioners to describe the community’s role in the reintegration process for released prisoners, as well as the impact of prisoner reentry on the community. It presents key findings about (1) characteristics of the communities where former prisoners live and their effect on successful reintegration; (2) housing issues confronting former prisoners; (3) perceptions of these places by former prisoners, residents, and reentry policymakers and practitioners; (4) employment and social services in these communities; (5) community support of former prisoners; and (6) community attitudes toward law enforcement and parole agencies.

The brief concludes with some proposed solutions offered by ex-prisoners, residents, policymakers, and practitioners to the challenges facing Chicago communities experiencing high rates of prisoner reentry. This research brief is intended to provide a foundation for policy conversations about how to improve the chances of successful reintegration for prisoners coming home, whether to Chicago communities or to similar areas around the country.

CHARACTERISTICS OF COMMUNITIES WHERE FORMER PRISONERS LIVE

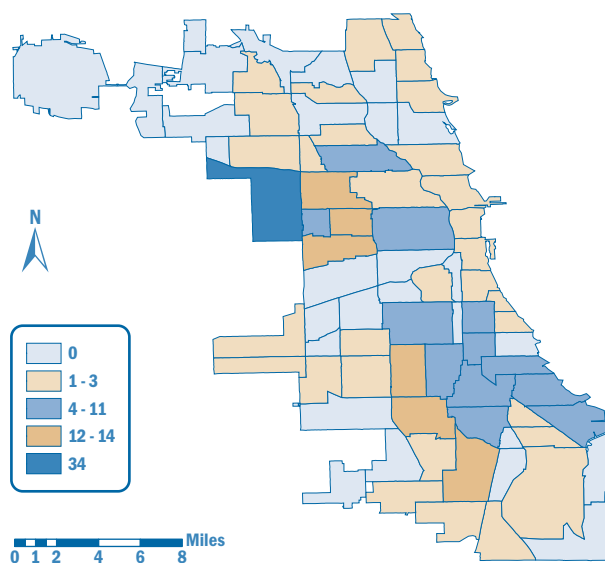
An earlier report from this study, *A Portrait of Prisoner Reentry in Illinois*, found that a large share of prisoners returning to Chicago are concentrated in disadvantaged communities with high levels of poverty and unemployment.³ Prisoners who return to communities deprived of resources and ill-equipped to meet the challenges of this

population may have higher rates of recidivism,⁴ and communities affected by high levels of incarceration and reentry may experience higher crime rates.⁵ Further, preliminary research has found that in areas experiencing both high rates of incarceration and high numbers of returning prisoners, relationships among residents become precarious, families experience higher stress levels, the image of the community to others is harmed, and financial investment in the community declines.⁶

Of the former prisoners in the *Returning Home* sample, 54 percent returned to just 7 of the 77 Chicago community areas—Austin, North Lawndale, East Garfield Park, West Englewood, Humboldt Park, Roseland, and Auburn Gresham (figure 1). These communities share several common economic and demographic characteristics: all seven have above-average rates of female-headed households and most have below-average high school graduation rates and above-average poverty rates (table 1).

However, there are also notable differences in these seven communities, suggesting that primary social problems may vary somewhat from place to place. For instance, Roseland has below-average rates of vacant housing, renter-occupied housing, and families below the poverty level, whereas North Lawndale is well above the city average on all three indicators. There are also substantial differences in terms of crime rates, ranging from 43 Part I crimes per 1,000 residents in West Engle-

FIGURE 1. Distribution of Released Prisoners in Returning Home Study Who Returned to Chicago, by Community (N = 246)



Note: N represents 246 of the 296 respondents for whom a valid postrelease neighborhood address could be determined.

wood to 124 Part I crimes per 1,000 in East Garfield Park. These community indicators suggest that former prisoners may face different types of obstacles even among disadvantaged communities.

TABLE 1. Characteristics of Seven Communities Receiving Former Prisoners

Community area	Vacant housing	Renter-occupied housing	High school graduates	Female-headed households	Families below poverty level	Part I crime rate (per 1,000 residents)
Austin	7.8%	57.1%	66.2%	38.3%	20.6%	70.9
Humboldt Park	10.1	62.4	50.3	32.8	28.7	74.5
North Lawndale	15.2	73.9	60.5	46.2	41.7	91.1
West Englewood	12.0	46.7	62.8	42.7	28.4	42.6
East Garfield Park	14.6	72.0	60.6	41.4	28.7	124.3
Roseland	6.8	36.0	76.8	35.1	14.2	81.7
Auburn Gresham	8.4	47.4	72.9	36.4	18.2	83.0
City average	8.0%	56.4%	71.8%	18.9%	17.4%	65.9

Sources: La Vigne and Mamalian (2003), with additional analysis by Urban Institute staff.

Note: Part I crimes include murder, aggravated assault, rape, robbery, larceny, burglary, stolen auto, and arson.

These Chicago communities cover large areas, and some may experience only pockets of concentrated disadvantage, rather than a uniform distribution of impoverished conditions throughout the community. This mix of social and demographic characteristics may lead to a community in which residents feel less connected with each other. Gentrification is changing the racial and social composition of certain traditionally low-income neighborhoods citywide, and these changes could affect the lives of returning prisoners. For example, former prisoners may be forced to reside in new communities if their family members had to move from recently revitalized ones. In Chicago, the renovation of older public housing units and the construction of new units is creating considerable relocation of low-income families. And, for those returning to their old neighborhoods, new community members may have less sympathy for former prisoners' difficulties and new services and businesses in the area may not be geared toward the needs or skills of this population.

In the focus groups we held with residents from four of these seven communities (see sidebar "*Returning Home Study Methodology*"), participants noted the composition of their neighborhoods changed over the years. They described their communities as places that used to be "good areas" before becoming overridden with drugs and gangs following the "white flight" to the suburbs that began in the 1950s. Now, long-term residents are being forced out by increased rents and property taxes as

The name is now gentrification, but it used to be called 'urban renewal'...the poor are being pushed out of the city and the rich are moving in. You can get Section 8 [vouchers] and go to the suburbs for a year. But when you come back, they won't take the Section 8 certificate [for the new housing].

Slowly they will get us out because rents keep going up. They are improving the neighborhood but [only] for them. The neighborhoods look better, but before you paid \$500 in rent and now they will pay \$300,000 for a condo.

—Two community residents

gentrification occurs, and they feel disenfranchised from the community. Further, they noted a lack of local leadership that could help promote the interests and well-being of their community.

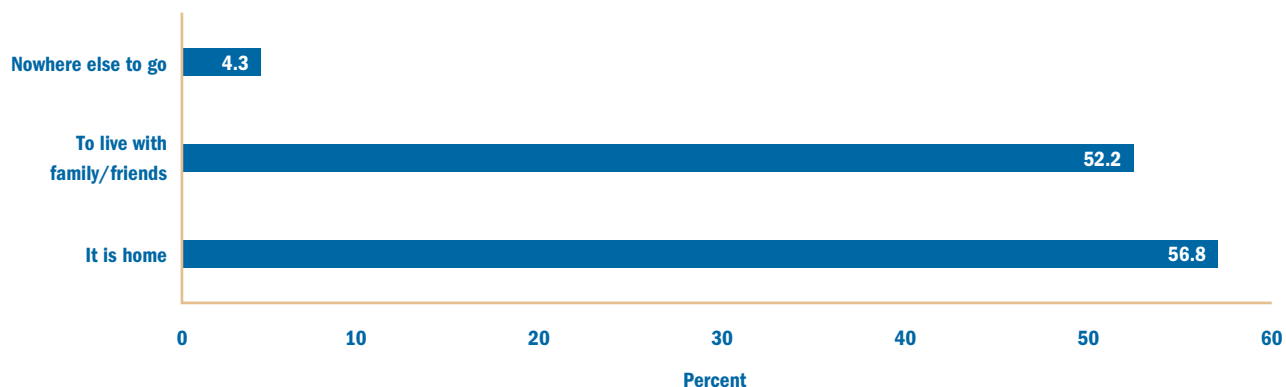
HOUSING ISSUES FACING FORMER PRISONERS

Conventional thinking may suggest that former prisoners return to the neighborhoods they lived in before incarceration. However, just over half of respondents interviewed in the first few months after their release from prison were living in the same Chicago neighborhood they lived in during the six months before they went to prison (54 percent). For the most part, former prisoners returned to these neighborhoods because it is where they lived before prison and where their families and friends live (figure 2).

Most former prisoners who settled in new neighborhoods indicated that they wanted to avoid trouble in their old neighborhoods or were living with family members who had moved to new addresses (figure 3). Less frequently mentioned reasons for residing in new neighborhoods were "to stay away from drugs" and "lost their old home." Many ex-prisoners who formerly lived in public housing alone or with family members may not have returned to their old neighborhoods because of widespread changes in the availability and location of public housing in Chicago since 2000. According to the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA), about 7,000 families were expected to move at least once into temporary or new, permanent housing. Thus, up to one-third of returning prisoners who moved to new places may have not returned to their former neighborhood because of ongoing changes in the stock and location of low-income housing in Chicago.⁷

While the majority of returning prisoners will live with family members following their release,⁸ for some this situation is only temporary and for others it is not even an option. If family or friends cannot provide housing, alternatives for former prisoners include community-based correctional housing facilities, transitional housing, federally subsidized and administered housing, the private market, and homeless assistance supportive housing.⁹

FIGURE 2. Former Prisoners' Reasons for Returning to Old Neighborhood (N = 161)



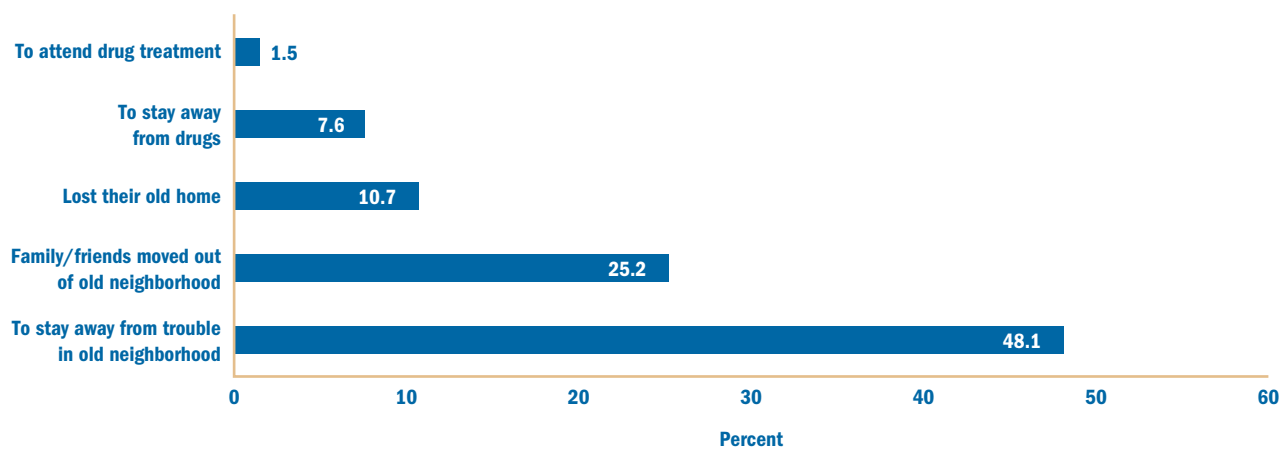
Note: Percents do not sum to 100 because respondents could check more than one response.

However, housing programs for ex-prisoners are extremely limited in most urban areas, and Chicago is no exception. Homelessness is a critical and complicated problem among former prisoners. According to a recent report, about one in 10 persons entering prison has been recently homeless, and about the same number of individuals who leave prison end up homeless at some point. Those with histories of mental illness and drug abuse are even more likely to be homeless.¹⁰ Released prisoners who do not have stable housing

arrangements are significantly more likely to end up back in prison.¹¹

Before their release from prison, participants in the *Returning Home* study generally recognized the significance of their postrelease living arrangements, with three-quarters of respondents reporting that having a place to live was important in staying out of prison. Despite the importance of this issue, 41 percent reported that finding a place to live was *not* covered in the pre-release program that all prisoners are required to attend.

FIGURE 3. Former Prisoners' Reasons for Residing in Different Neighborhood (N = 130)



Note: Percents do not sum to 100 because "other" responses are not included in the chart.

And only 10 percent of those who said that they needed help finding a place to live received a referral to a community contact for housing assistance.

Most returning prisoners had secured a place to live before they left prison (85 percent). Of those who did not have a place lined up, the majority contacted a family member to find housing; others contacted a shelter or friend. Only three respondents used a referral service/housing program and one person relied on a government program.

The majority of the returning prisoners lived with family members after release (88 percent). Most were living in someone else's home (75 percent), with fewer in their own home (16 percent), a transition facility or halfway house (5 percent), a shelter or rooming house (2 percent), or a residential treatment facility (1 percent). Only one respondent reported being homeless in the first six months after release.¹²

Former prisoners often return to living arrangements that are only temporary. According to the policy of the Illinois Department of Correction, all parolees are released to a specific address, even if the location is not ideal. We tracked the *Returning Home* prisoner sample to determine how often prisoners moved to a new address in the first eight months after their release. Nearly one in five (19 percent) reported living at more than one address after being in the community for one to three months. By six to eight months, 31 percent had lived at more than one address. Furthermore, over half (53 percent) believed they would not be staying in the neighborhood for long, suggesting even higher mobility over time.

Even among those two-thirds of respondents (69 percent) who had resided in the same place since release, housing stability may not be very high. At the six-month interview, many respondents conveyed their desire to find new housing, with 40 percent reporting that at that moment a housing program would be useful to them. Forty-four percent reported that getting their own home was one of their personal hopes and goals for the next 12 months.

We also talked with reentry policymakers and practitioners, including local service providers and Chicago offi-

cial, about housing problems facing former prisoners. While returning to their families might be the optimal situation for some returning prisoners, service providers and policymakers thought transitional housing would be more appropriate in many cases. Transitional housing intends to provide former prisoners with a place where they can begin readjusting, start a job search, reconnect with family members, and make some positive connections without the added stress of renegotiating family relationships and paying rent. Several reentry policymakers and practitioners emphasized the importance of stable housing immediately after release, noting that without housing, former prisoners cannot look for a job or try to resolve any other concerns. One practitioner commented that in her experience, a substantial fraction of all released prisoners, perhaps as many as 30 to 50 percent, would benefit from transitional housing for several months after release.

Reentry policymakers and practitioners indicated that Chicago lacks affordable housing in general, even for people who do not have a criminal record. And while some funds are available to pay for housing for former prisoners, reasonably priced locations are difficult to find. Landlords increasingly conduct background checks for prospective renters and avoid renting to former prisoners. However, the landlords are not worried about crime as much as they are about the person's reliability in paying the rent, and they view ex-prisoners as a high risk. Another restriction on housing is the not-in-my-back-yard (NIMBY) mentality. Communities will sometimes actively oppose the creation of group homes or transitional housing centers out of concern for safety or property values.

There is not enough affordable housing in the city of Chicago . . . that is a fact regardless of whether or not you have a criminal background. . . . The first month out, that first 90 days, are so crucial for people and you are going to tell them they have to wait 12 months before they are going to be able to have a stable place to live? That is not going to cut it.

—Reentry policymaker/practitioner

PERCEPTIONS OF WHERE FORMER PRISONERS LIVE

The economic and social characteristics of the communities to which prisoners return indicate that these areas are disadvantaged and may not be very favorable for successful reentry. To better understand how these neighborhoods affect reentry, we wanted to find out the opinions held by former prisoners, community residents, and reentry policymakers and practitioners based on their experiences living and working in these communities. We asked all respondents about their communities in terms of housing, employment, services, criminal behavior, and the role of residents and organizations in the reentry process. Before examining these specific topics in detail, we explore former prisoners' and residents' general opinions of the communities in which they live.

Former prisoners reported mixed views on the conditions of their communities. We examine these views separately for those who returned to an old neighborhood and those who returned to a new neighborhood, noting some similarities between these groups and some differences (figure 4). Roughly three-quarters of all respondents *strongly agreed* or *agreed* that their current neighborhoods were good places to live (73 percent who returned to the same neighborhood and 77 percent who moved to a new neighborhood). Furthermore, both groups generally felt safe in their neighborhoods (75 percent who returned to the same neighborhood and 78 percent who moved to a new neighborhood). Yet, only 23 percent of those who were residing in a new neighborhood and 26 percent of those who returned to their old neighborhoods *strongly agreed* or *agreed* that their neighborhood was a good place to find a job. This perception of job inaccessibility could hinder former prisoners' successful employment. We examine the relationship between returning prisoners' perceptions of their communities and their employment experiences later in this report.

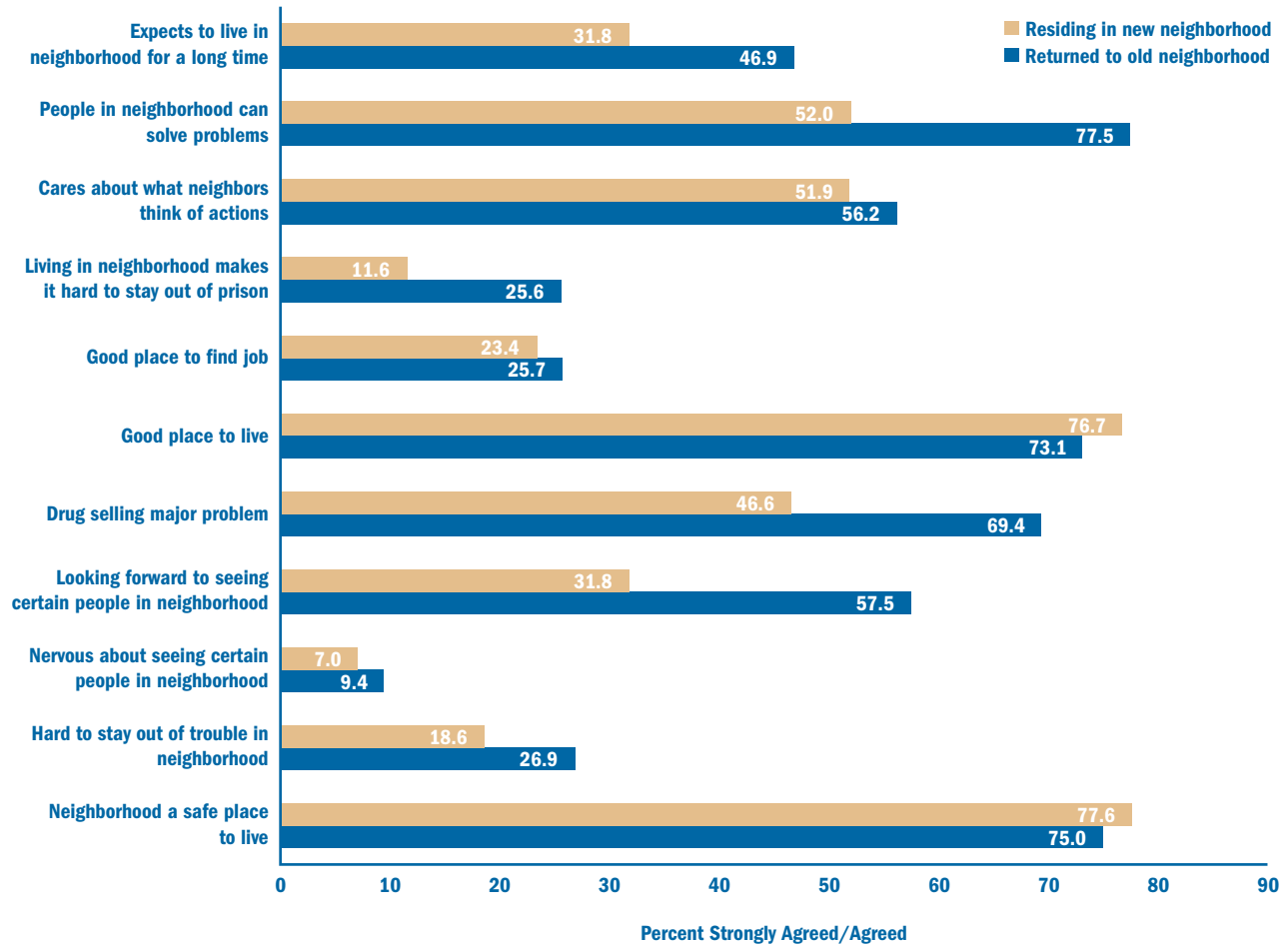
Former prisoners' opinions of community risk did depend on whether they returned to their old neighborhood. Former prisoners who returned to their old neighborhood perceived significantly more overall neighborhood disorder than those who were residing in

new neighborhoods.¹³ In general, prisoners who resided in new neighborhoods perceived fewer risks. For example, of those who returned to their old neighborhoods, 69 percent *strongly agreed* or *agreed* that drug selling was a major problem in their community. By contrast, 47 percent of those who resided in a new neighborhood thought that drug selling was a major problem in that community. Those who returned to their old neighborhoods were also more likely to *strongly agree* or *agree* that living in that neighborhood makes it hard to stay out of prison (26 percent), compared with respondents residing in a new neighborhood (12 percent).

However, with less long-term investment and fewer ties with community members, a new residential neighborhood might not necessarily translate into a more hospitable and supportive community experience. Fewer ex-prisoners residing in new communities than those who returned to their old communities indicated they would live in that community for a long time (32 versus 47 percent), that they were looking forward to seeing certain people there (32 versus 58 percent), and that the people in their community could solve problems (52 versus 78 percent).

Community characteristics can serve as either risks or protective factors in the reentry experience. For example, former prisoners with a history of substance abuse living near an open-air drug market may be more likely to relapse. In our analysis of former prisoners' experiences about six months after release, we found that released prisoners who lived in neighborhoods where they felt drug selling was a problem were more likely to have engaged in substance use after release (20 percent) than those living in neighborhoods where drug selling was not a problem (10 percent, as shown in figure 5). Furthermore, respondents who viewed their communities as safe and good places to live were much less likely to return to prison (22 percent) than those who reported their community was unsafe and disorganized (52 percent).

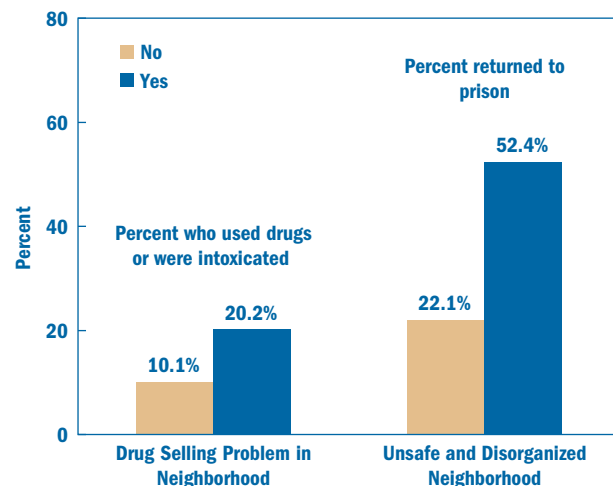
Turning to the views of community residents, during the focus groups, many residents described their neighborhoods as drug-ridden areas in which neighbors have little concern for others. They indicated that their communities have a lot of dysfunctional families, which are not

FIGURE 4. Ex-Prisoners' Perceptions of their Community, by Choice of Neighborhood after Release


equipped to support family members returning from prison. As mentioned earlier, many attributed the poor social conditions to “white flight” to the suburbs, which began in many Chicago communities during the 1950s and ’60s. By and large, residents did not attribute community changes to returning prisoners, and did not raise concerns about the impact of returning prisoners on already scarce neighborhood resources. Residents also did not hold former prisoners responsible for drug trafficking in their neighborhoods, although they believed that many former prisoners return to that activity after release.

Reentry policymakers and practitioners held a slightly different view of how former prisoners affect communities. Some believed that individuals who do not successfully reenter their communities increase the risk of problems in their neighborhoods. However, many blamed the general conditions and atmosphere of communities with high concentrations of former prisoners, and not former prisoners themselves. Others mentioned that the lack of positive community role models for former prisoners has an impact on reintegration, commenting that young black males returning from prison rarely witness success stories in these communities.

FIGURE 5. Prisoners' Perceptions of Neighborhood and Postrelease Outcomes



EMPLOYMENT AND SOCIAL SERVICES IN THE COMMUNITY

Former prisoners face serious obstacles to employment when they return to their communities. Not only do they tend to have poor job histories, but the communities to which they return often have high unemployment rates. In cities like Chicago, deindustrialization is responsible for many lost job opportunities for low-skilled workers.¹⁴ Resident focus-group participants believed it is difficult for former prisoners to find legal employment. As one resident pointed out, "...it is tough enough for those people who have never been in jail to get jobs."

Thus, characteristics of neighborhoods in which former prisoners reside may be related to employment after

An individual comes back into this community with his peers that he hung out with and he has no positive support of individuals who have been successful in their reentry. . . . So, he comes into a situation where the atmosphere and the environment is negative and gloomy. It cannot help but impact you. You have to be a very strong individual not to adopt that same attitude because of that environment.

—Reentry policymaker/practitioner

release. Only one in four returning prisoners *strongly agreed* or *agreed* that the neighborhood in which they were residing at the time of the first postrelease interview was a good place to find a job, and a majority also described their neighborhood as one in which drug selling is common. At about six months after release, many more former prisoners were employed if they lived in neighborhoods where they thought jobs were available (54 percent) than those who lived in other neighborhoods (21 percent). Moreover, those who said that their neighborhood was a good place to find a job worked significantly more weeks (10 weeks versus 4.2 weeks). Prisoners who reported that they lived in communities where drug selling was a problem worked half as many weeks as those who lived elsewhere (4 weeks versus 8.6 weeks).

Thus, as in the discussion on community characteristics and postrelease drug use, aspects of the neighborhoods to which prisoners return are related to important reintegration outcomes. In particular, the likelihood of former prisoners using drugs after release, the likelihood of finding a job, the number of weeks worked, and even their chances of returning to prison appear to be associated with neighborhood characteristics such as "good place to find a job," "good place to live," "a safe place to live," and "drug selling is a problem." Safe and crime-free neighborhoods may reinforce conventional behaviors and lifestyles or other residents' expectations may restrain former prisoners' negative behaviors. Future analyses will explore this relationship in more detail.¹⁵

The community can also be an important social resource for former prisoners by providing local services that facilitate their transition back into society. However, many of Chicago's returning prisoners indicated that their neighborhoods do not have a strong capacity to provide needed services. Fewer than one-third of the respondents reported that important services were available in their communities after their release. Figure 6 shows that counseling, mental health treatment, parenting, and anger management services were available to 10 to 13 percent of respondents. Job training was reported available to 14 percent of returning prisoners, and adult education programs (including GED) were available to 21 percent. Thus, many returning prisoners—

more than three-fourths—report that services are not available in their neighborhoods.

In focus groups, most community residents said that local programs and social services are important for this population given their lack of job skills, emotions after release (e.g., hopelessness, depression, anger), and other challenges. Some suggested that all former prisoners should get counseling just to cope with reentry, even if they do not have a history of mental health problems. Community residents pointed out that some neighborhoods have abundant programs for ex-prisoners, while others do not. Participants in several focus groups remarked that information about available programs and resources is not centralized or easily available to former prisoners and their relatives.

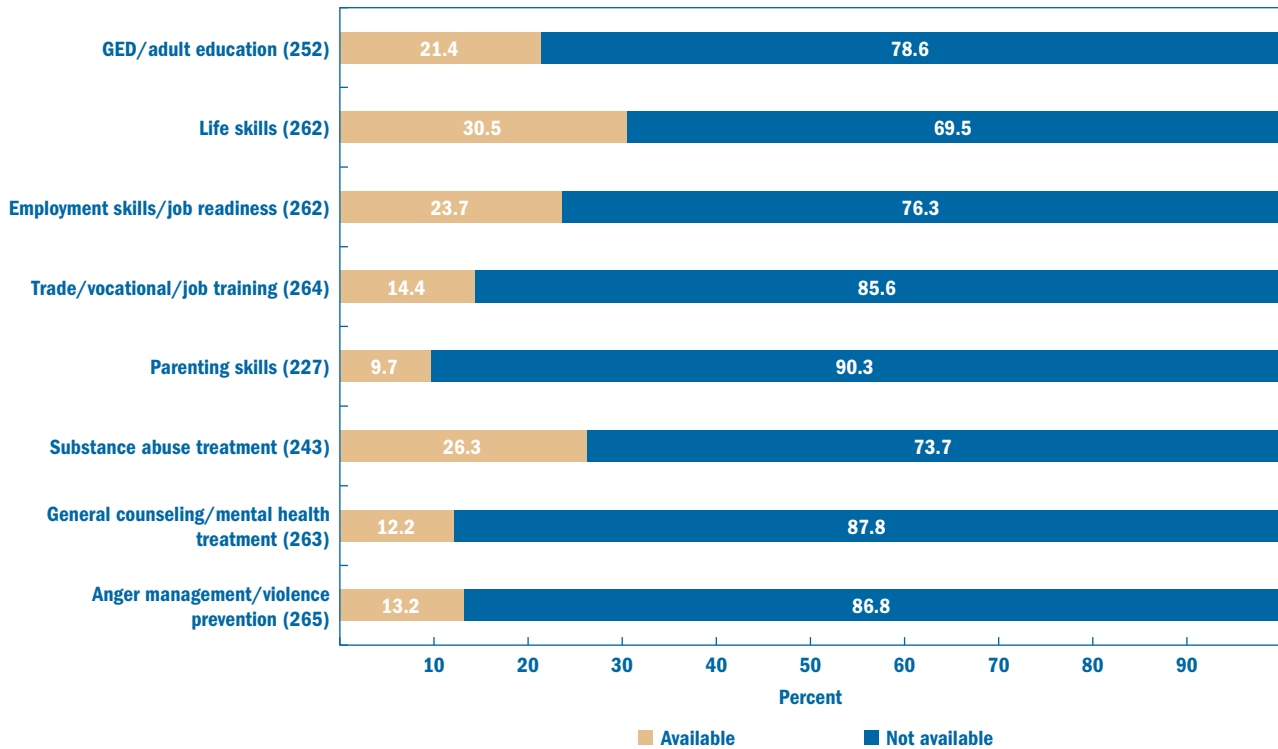
Reentry policymakers and practitioners concurred with community residents that the quantity and quality of services available to former prisoners are grossly inadequate, with some communities showing greater program

capacity than others. Some of those interviewed identified a need to better coordinate services for specific problems, but they did not agree on a single best model of service delivery. However, the new Sheridan prison was mentioned as a good model for substance abuse treatment.¹⁶ It will offer services both inside and outside the prison walls. Other programs, such as transitional centers, offer many essential services but are often understaffed and have far too few program slots relative to demand.

COMMUNITY SUPPORT OF FORMER PRISONERS

While residents of the four communities selected for the focus groups were attuned to the high concentrations of former prisoners in their communities, they were also sympathetic toward released prisoners and acknowledged that prisoners faced many obstacles upon return. However, residents generally felt that their communities

FIGURE 6. Former Prisoners’ Knowledge of the Availability of Community-Based Programs (Ns in parentheses)



I think one of our challenges [in Chicago] is how can we support the organizations . . . and help them in building their capacity [to provide services to former prisoners] and in encouraging others to take on this challenge.

—*Reentry policymaker*

had not been supportive of felons. They spoke of drug-ridden areas with little community spirit. They indicated that supportive families are key to a successful transition, but that many families are not always equipped to cope with the transition. Further, while they agreed that the community should support returning prisoners, most were not able to specify the types of support the community should offer, and some expressed exasperation about not knowing how they could help.

Reentry policymakers and practitioners generally did not think that these communities were prepared for returning prisoners and the community's capacity to accept and reintegrate former prisoners was mentioned as the biggest obstacle. Besides problems associated with the delivery and coordination of essential services in neighborhoods with large numbers of former prisoners, many spoke about the need to think about reintegration in broader terms and develop a vision that incorporates residents as active participants. Several of those interviewed were also concerned that former prisoners might have to cope with an unfriendly environment upon their return. They acknowledged the fact that many residents were also victims of crime. They suggested that since neighborhood residents have personal knowledge of both offenders and

Not everybody can be safe, but I think that the community should provide certain things that these people need to give them a chance. Not everyone is going to make it, but for those who do, it is worth it. When they first get out, where are they going to live? How are they going to survive? What can I do to help them?

—*Community resident*

victims, they may have mixed feelings about the return of former prisoners to their community.

Returning prisoners might gain more local support if they were viewed as assets to their communities. Unfortunately, this does not seem to be the case. Community residents could not think of many positive aspects of prisoner reentry. They did not speak about men returning to their families or fathers returning to their children. Reentry policymakers and practitioners referred to former prisoners as a potentially important source of the communities' social capital—the community's access to external resources, its internal social network, and its capacity to support residents' well-being. However, they also recognized that without sufficient community resources to provide returning prisoners with the necessary skills to cope with their transition, it is easy to see how this population could be viewed more as a burden than an asset.

[Successful prisoner reintegration] is meaningful integration in the community, where you feel like a part of that community, and the community welcomes you and makes you feel like you are part of the community.

—*Reentry practitioner*

Neighborhood organizations could enhance ex-prisoners' social ties to their community by providing needed skills, services, and opportunities for local involvement. Only 16 percent of former prisoners, however, reported belonging to a community-based organization, such as a church group, ex-offender group, sports team, or recreation club. Religious institutions are potentially important sources of social support for returning prisoners. These institutions have also traditionally offered a wide range of secular services to former prisoners and their families, including the provision of food, shelter, and clothing. Some even provide educational services, job programming, housing assistance, and counseling.¹⁷ In two resident focus groups, participants mentioned insufficient support from neighborhood churches. "Churches play a great role; they are doing the best they can, but not as they used to." On the other hand, one reentry practitioner championed pastors' efforts in these communities

and explained that they want to help but are overwhelmed with the number of people needing services and the support that many former prisoners require.

ATTITUDES TOWARD LAW ENFORCEMENT AND PAROLE

Community attitudes toward state functions, such as law enforcement and parole, are important considerations when shaping reentry policies. Given the substantial impact these institutions have on returning prisoners, community residents, and reentry policymakers and practitioners, we asked respondents in all three samples to assess the role of law enforcement and parole agencies in the reentry process.

Not surprisingly, former prisoners had negative attitudes toward the police in the neighborhoods in which they lived prior to their incarceration. Fewer than one-third (32 percent) *strongly agreed* or *agreed* that the police were doing a good job with problems in their neighborhoods, and fewer than half (44 percent) *strongly agreed* or *agreed* that the police did a good job responding to victims of crime. More than half *strongly agreed* or *agreed* that the police were racist (54 percent) and that the police were not able to maintain order (57 percent). More than two-thirds (71 percent) *strongly agreed* or *agreed* that the police brutalized people in their neighborhoods. A majority of former prisoners (63 percent) *strongly agreed* or *agreed* that the police were *not* preventing crime.

In the community focus groups, residents shared some of these negative views toward law enforcement and expressed their dissatisfaction with the way police handle former prisoners. Participants talked specifically about police harassing returning prisoners and even a belief among some that police officers may plant evidence on former prisoners to send them back to prison.

In addition, some reentry policymakers and practitioners were concerned that the longstanding tensions in minority communities between residents and local law enforcement would tip the scales against ex-prisoners' attempts to "go straight," given the street-level discretion exercised by police officers, probation officers, and parole agents. Many also expressed concern that the prevailing culture in these agencies was really focused on punishment and not on helping returning prisoners

[Police] are not like they used to be anymore; even the kids don't trust police these days. Before the police would stop and talk, laugh with the kids. Now they just look at you.

Police should be fighting crime, not trying to rearrest the returning prisoners. They should stop harassing them and give them a chance.

—Community residents

reintegrate into the community. On the other hand, several commended the Chicago Police Department for efforts to help former prisoners. They pointed out that the department has coordinated a series of community forums over the past few years designed to build a partnership with social service agencies, businesses, the faith community, and other participants that can provide alternatives for returning prisoners.

Most Illinois prisoners are released to a period of community supervision, during which they are expected to follow parole conditions enforced by the Parole Division of the Illinois Department of Corrections. Consistent with that policy, almost all *Returning Home* respondents (99 percent) reported being on supervision when interviewed four to eight months after release. Most (74 percent) reported meeting monthly with their parole officers, with the average visit lasting 5 to 30 minutes. Respondents held generally positive feelings toward their parole officers: most believed their parole officer treated them with respect (94 percent), was trustworthy (84 percent), and acted professionally (94 percent). Nonetheless, only half (52 percent) said their parole officer had been helpful in their transition to the community and that being under supervision would help them stay out of prison (45 percent).

Parolees are usually required to abide by parole conditions that may be difficult for them to comply with given the conditions and circumstances of their communities. For example, 85 percent of the respondents reported that they were not supposed to associate with others on parole as a condition of their supervision. However, many parolees may live with family members who are

under criminal justice supervision; in fact, about one in three (31 percent) *Returning Home* respondents had a family member who had been in prison, and one in ten (11 percent) were living with someone who had been in prison. Furthermore, given the high concentrations of former prisoners in some communities, respondents likely encounter others on parole simply because they live in that community. Another common parole condition restricts parolees from visiting places where controlled substances may be present. Yet drug use and drug selling are common in many of the neighborhoods to which they return; this immediately puts parolees at a higher risk of violating parole simply by living in that community.

Community members perceived parole officers as playing a potentially central role to the successful reentry of former prisoners. They thought parole officers, ideally, should be an effective resource for the returning prisoner by providing referrals to services and possible employers and by maintaining close supervision. However, many residents are aware that parole officers have large case-loads, are overworked, and cannot do their job.

Reentry practitioners expressed some concerns about parole agents' role in supporting the reintegration of former prisoners and viewed parole violations as the heart of the problem of rising admissions to prison in Illinois. In 2004, more than 9,000 Illinois parolees were returned to prison because of a technical parole violation (e.g., not meeting with parole officer or a positive drug test).¹⁸ Policymakers and practitioners suggested that it was time to move from a law enforcement model of parole to an approach that emphasizes supporting former prisoners through a blend of supervision and case management.

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

Reentry policymakers and practitioners, resident focus group participants, and former prisoners offered several solutions to the community-related reentry issues discussed in this report. In general, their proposed solutions focused on revising state prerelease and parole practices, providing more social services to former prisoners, and strengthening the economic and social structure of the communities to which many prisoners return.

We need to go back to the old ways. Many of these guys might not go back if the parole officer is doing his job, like following them, having them come in, checking on them. Now you just call in and that's it.

—Community resident

Community residents who participated in the focus groups felt that former prisoners are not well prepared for their return to the community. They recommended that released prisoners receive more employment services, housing assistance, and mental health programs to help them cope and readjust to their freedom. They also believed that the community—particularly churches—should take a more active role in assisting released prisoners. While residents generally saw former prisoners as primarily responsible for making their return to the com-

I think the feeling on the street is that [parole officers] really have become an extension of law enforcement and have moved away from being more positive case managers, figuring out how to help people stay out of prison. It is a little bit more like [the parole officer] is just another person looking over your shoulder trying to find you slipping up so we can lock you back up.

—Reentry practitioner

munity successful, they also saw the government as responsible for providing a smooth transition by offering counseling, job training and placement, and housing assistance. Some encouraged greater use of halfway houses or transitional living facilities for former prisoners.

There was consensus that the community should not give up on returning prisoners and that it needs to give returning prisoners a second chance and embrace them. However, residents' suggestions as to what they could provide for support were vague—most spoke in generalities about “giving them their support,” and “giving them a second chance.” In one focus group, some participants felt they could organize and support legislation to ex-

punge some former prisoners' records and encourage local businesses to hire individuals recently released from prison.

To facilitate prisoners' transitions home, residents suggested thinking beyond individuals and toward encouraging economic development in the community. Reentry policymakers and practitioners also focused on the importance of community development as well as a redirection in the mission of parole and the criminal justice system as a whole. They offered several approaches to improving the capacity of communities to support large numbers of returning prisoners. For example, while state and local government can provide important support and funding mechanisms, ultimately the focus must be on changing local community processes and delivering adequate services where former prisoners live. As one policymaker noted, communities are unique places with different assets and liabilities. A comprehensive approach would address the problem at all levels in a coordinated manner, depending on the needs of that community. Conversely, others felt focusing intently on one problem, such as jobs, substance abuse, or housing, could make a larger impact because comprehensive approaches may spread resources too thin and yield no measurable impact.

Many policymakers and practitioners noted the importance of developing effective community-driven coalitions and partnerships to approach reentry, as in North Lawndale, where local organizations and social service agencies, each with special skills, are joining forces to provide a network of help to former prisoners with support from the Illinois Department of Correction. Others suggested directing more resources to prepare community residents for prisoner reentry and to engage their participation in the process.

Reentry policymakers, practitioners, and former prisoners stressed the importance of bolstering prerelease preparation for exiting prisoners and making greater use of transitional programs. In interviews after release, former prisoners also emphasized the importance of access to programs in their communities to ease their reentry. In fact, during the interview at about six months after release, 99 percent of respondents indicated that services would be useful to them "right now." While the needs

The community is not prepared. One Chicago community is seeing 80 percent of its males come back from prison, and it is not prepared to see that there is a positive way to handle prisoner reentry. We want to reclaim them. We want them to be reconciled to the victims. What can we do together to do this? How can we support them? How do we hold them accountable? How do we bring their families in and embrace their families? . . . There are ways you can start preparing the community to think about things like this. We have done none of that.

—Reentry practitioner

varied for each individual, it was clear from their responses that these men recognized the importance of opportunities for building social support networks.

CONCLUSION

This report provides a synthesis of three separate voices: recently released prisoners, residents in Chicago neighborhoods with large numbers of former prisoners, and reentry policymakers and practitioners. Despite this diversity in perspectives, a high degree of consensus emerged concerning the challenges facing former prisoners and their communities. Perhaps the essential message is the need to expand services and resources to former prisoners and their communities. In addition, greater communication and collaboration—between former prisoners and community residents, between local communities and social service or city agencies, and between city and state governments—would help local communities address the challenge of prisoner reentry.

In Chicago and across the state of Illinois, such collaborative efforts have been under way since early 2004. Both the Mayor of Chicago and the Governor of Illinois are devising new strategies for improving the successful reintegration of men and women released from prison and returning home, and several new state, city, and community efforts are ongoing. In the coming months and years, monitoring these reentry innovations to assess what is working and what is not will be important, so that other cities and states around the country might

RETURNING HOME STUDY METHODOLOGY

Returning Home is being implemented in four states, including a pilot study in Maryland (completed May 2003) and full research studies in Illinois, Ohio, and Texas. In each state, our goal is to understand released prisoners' life circumstances immediately prior to incarceration and following their release from prison, as well as up to one year into their reintegration within the community. Each study involves surveys and interviews that explore various reentry expectations, needs, and experiences, such as pre-release preparation, postrelease housing and employment, and the renewal of personal relationships.

The study design in Illinois entails three data collection efforts. The first effort involved 400 male prisoners returning to the city of Chicago and included a self-administered survey given to groups of prisoners one to three months prior to release and three interviews with sample members conducted one to three months, four to six months, and approximately one year after release. The second effort entailed one-on-one interviews with family members of the prisoners in our sample. The third effort consisted of interviews with reentry policymakers and practitioners and focus groups with Chicago community members. Data in this research brief come from the self-administered prerelease surveys of 400 prisoners, the first and second postrelease interviews conducted with subsets of the original sample, the resident focus groups, and interviews with reentry policymakers and practitioners in Chicago.

Illinois prisoners were recruited over a five-month period beginning in October 2002, and the final sample was generally representative of all Chicago-bound releases from state correctional facilities, although they had more prior incarcerations, were less likely to have been incarcerated for a technical violation, and were more likely housed in a

medium-security facility. Postrelease interviews were conducted between January 2003 and April 2004. Additional information about the prisoner sample is available in an earlier report.¹⁹

In the spring and summer of 2004, we conducted two focus groups with community residents in four neighborhoods in Chicago—North Lawndale, Austin, Humboldt Park, and East Garfield Park—that are home to the highest concentrations of returning prisoners. These neighborhoods were selected based on the geographic analysis of released prisoners conducted for *A Portrait of Prisoner Reentry in Illinois*.²⁰ While not by design, focus group participants across all four neighborhoods were personally acquainted with at least one released prisoner, and the vast majority had close relatives or friends in the penal system. Of central interest were their attitudes, the role community members play in the reentry process, and how they are affected by the many returning prisoners in their community. A total of 68 residents participated in the focus groups. Most were African American and over half (53 percent) were women. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 60 years old.

We also conducted semi-structured interviews with 22 reentry policymakers and practitioners in Chicago from November 2003 through February 2004. Interviewees were selected from various organizations, including reentry service specialists, community leaders, law enforcement personnel, city and state government officials, and policy and evaluation researchers, in an effort to obtain a wide perspective on reentry issues. Participants were asked to respond to a variety of reentry topics, such as housing, jobs, services, families and friends, neighborhoods, law enforcement, state policies and practices, and resources and individual responsibility.

learn from these experiences and develop appropriate community-based strategies for improving the lives of individuals released from prison and their families.

ENDNOTES

¹ The city of Chicago has divided its geographic space into 77 "community areas." The city uses these areas to organize service delivery and for planning. Census data have also been mapped to correspond to these areas, thus conveniently

allowing us to study the relationship between returning prisoners and the characteristics of the places to which they return. This report uses the terms community and neighborhood interchangeably, although the authors recognize that a community area may comprise several distinct sections or neighborhoods.

² Dina R. Rose and Todd R. Clear. "Incarceration, Social Capital, and Crime: Implications for Social Disorganization Theory." *Criminology* 36 (1998): 441–79.

³ Nancy La Vigne and Cynthia Mamalian. "A Portrait of Prisoner Reentry in Illinois." Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2003. In 2001, 30,068 people were released from Illinois prisons. Over half (53 percent) of these returning prisoners returned to the city of Chicago. In 2004, 36,804 people were released from Illinois prisons.

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⁴ Eric Baumer. "Community Context and Offender Recidivism in Illinois." Unpublished report.

⁵ Todd Clear, Dina Rose, Elin Waring, and Kristen Scully. "Coercive Mobility and Crime: A Preliminary Examination of Concentrated Incarceration and Social Disorganization." *Justice Quarterly* 20 (2003): 33–64.

⁶ Todd R. Clear, Dina R. Rose, and Judith A. Ryder. "Incarceration and the Community: The Problem of Removing and Returning Offenders." *Crime & Delinquency* 47 (2001): 335–51.

⁷ In addition, former prisoners may not be eligible to live in properties managed by the Chicago Housing Authority, including in Section 8 approved housing units; however, CHA permits some exceptions.

⁸ Nancy La Vigne, Christy Visher, and Jennifer Castro. "Chicago Prisoners' Experiences Returning Home." Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2004.

⁹ Caterina Gouvis Roman and Jeremy Travis. "Taking Stock: Housing, Homelessness, and Prisoner Reentry." Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2004.

¹⁰ Roman and Travis, "Taking Stock: Housing, Homelessness, and Prisoner Reentry."

¹¹ Stephen Metraux and Dennis P. Culhane. "Homeless Shelter Use and Reincarceration Following Prison Release: Assessing the Risk." *Criminology and Public Policy* 3 (2004): 139–60.

¹² It is possible that some of the respondents who we were unable to locate were homeless, although field interviewers routinely inquired at Chicago shelters and examined sign-in sheets when attempting to locate respondents.

¹³ Neighborhood disorder is measured as a scale of five items with which respondents strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed, or strongly disagreed: (a) your neighborhood is a safe place to live, (b) it is hard to stay out of trouble in your neighborhood, (c) you are nervous about seeing certain people in your neighborhood, (d) living in this neighborhood makes it hard for you to stay out of prison, and (e) drug selling is a major problem in your neighborhood.

¹⁴ William J. Wilson. *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor*. New York: Knopf, 1996.

¹⁵ We examined whether these relationships were due to differences in respondents' perceptions of their neighborhoods (e.g., unemployed respondents more likely to report that their neighborhood is not a good place to find a job), but we found that the majority of respondents living in a specific area reported similar

perceptions of their neighborhood. For more discussion of how neighborhood-level factors might influence individual behavior, see Robert Sampson, Jeffrey Morenoff, and Thomas Gannon-Rowley. "Assessing Neighborhood-Effects: Social Processes and New Directions in Research." *Annual Review of Sociology* 28 (2002): 443–78.

¹⁶ In January 2004, the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) launched the Sheridan National Model Drug Prison and Reentry Program at the Sheridan Correctional Center. One year later, Sheridan has become the largest fully dedicated drug treatment prison in the United States.

¹⁷ For a review of the role of faith-based organizations in promoting community safety and representative promising programs, see Jeanette Hercik, Richard Lewis, Bradley Myles, Caterina Gouvis, Janine Zweig, Alyssa Whitby, Gabriella Rico, and Elizabeth McBride. "A Guide to Resources on Faith-Based Organizations in Criminal Justice." Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice, 2004. <http://www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles1/nij/grants/209350.pdf#search=faithbased%20resources%20criminal%20justice%20NIJ>

¹⁸ The number of parole violators from Chicago was not available, but since half of all prisoners return to Chicago, it is likely that at least half of all parole violators are also from Chicago.

¹⁹ La Vigne, Visher, and Castro. "Chicago Prisoners' Experiences Returning Home."

²⁰ La Vigne and Mamalian. "A Portrait of Prisoner Reentry in Illinois."

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