

OHIO PRISONERS' REFLECTIONS ON RETURNING HOME

KEY FINDINGS

- Most prisoners returning to the Cleveland area had extensive criminal histories, with 65 percent having served more than one prison term and 39 percent most recently serving time because of a supervision violation.
- One-third of prisoners participated in classes or training, with almost one in seven earning a GED.
- About two-thirds of prisoners were legally employed before this prison term, but 53 percent also reported income from illegal sources, and only 22 percent had a job lined up after release.

(Continued on page 2)

The Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction released 28,177 individuals from prisons across the state in 2004,¹ nearly six times the number of prisoners released in 1980.² Ohio has the seventh largest prison population in the country,³ and 22 percent of released prisoners return to Cuyahoga County, with 79 percent of those returning to Cleveland.⁴ 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 and the fiscal and social consequences of unsuccessful reintegration, has brought prisoner reentry—both in Ohio and nationwide—to the forefront of the public agenda.

To help inform the next generation of reentry policy and practice, the Urban Institute launched *Returning Home: Understanding the Challenges of Prisoner Reentry*, a multistate research project in Maryland, Illinois, Ohio, and Texas. The purpose of *Returning Home* is to develop a deeper understanding of the reentry experiences of returning prisoners, their families, and their communities. This research project involves interviews with male prisoners before and after their release from state correctional facilities, focus groups with residents in neighborhoods to which many prisoners return, and interviews with reentry policymakers and practitioners. State laws and policies are also reviewed to provide overall policy context.

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REENTRY DEFINED

For the purposes of this report, “reentry” is defined as the process of leaving an adult correctional institution and returning to society. We have limited our scope to those sentenced to serve time in state correctional institutions to focus on individuals who are convicted of more serious offenses, are eligible for state correctional programs, and may be managed by state correctional, parole, and felony probation systems after release.

KEY FINDINGS*(Continued from page 1)*

- Almost three in four prisoners (72 percent) reported illegal drug use prior to their incarceration (mostly marijuana and cocaine), yet 50 percent of respondents did not participate in any drug or alcohol treatment programs while incarcerated.
- The majority of prisoners felt close to their family during their prison stay; 70 percent expected to live with family after release, and almost half expected that family would be a source of financial support.
- Most prisoners were optimistic about the future, with 77 percent saying that it would be easy to stay out of prison and avoid a parole violation (among respondents who expected to be on parole), yet most also said that they would need help with job training/education, counseling, and financial assistance.

This report presents findings from surveys completed by 424 males shortly before their release from Ohio prisons and their return to Cuyahoga County. We present descriptive statistics regarding respondents' criminal histories; substance use; employment backgrounds; current health problems; in-prison programming experiences; relationships with family members; and expectations for release. Overall, these findings describe a population with extensive histories of substance use and criminal behavior, yet strong family ties and great optimism for their return home.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS IN OHIO

These preliminary findings represent the views of 424 men who were about to be released from Ohio prisons. With regard to the demographic characteristics of our sample, 74 percent of the respondents were black, 18 percent were white, and 8 percent were of another racial group or multiracial. Five percent of the sample were Hispanic or Latino. Their

INCARCERATION AND RELEASE TRENDS IN OHIO

Ohio's rate of prison population growth had mirrored the national level for almost two decades, until 1998, when Ohio's state prison population peaked and started a three-year decline. Between 1982 and 1998, Ohio's prison population nearly tripled in size from 17,147 to 48,171. After three years of decreases (1998–2000), the Ohio prison population grew by less than 1 percent from 2001 to 2004 to reach 44,082. By 2004, Ohio had the 7th largest prison population in the United States and the 25th highest incarceration rate, with 391 prisoners per 100,000 residents. The increases in the Ohio prison population are due to more admissions and longer lengths of stay. Increased admissions, particularly from 1987 to 1992, were the result of a dramatic rise in new commitments for drug offenses, as well as increases in serious violent crime, and thus in new commitments for violent offenders. Longer lengths of stay, especially for more serious offenses, also contributed to Ohio's prison population growth. Ohio's release patterns generally reflect the national admissions trends over the

past two decades. In 2004, 28,177 inmates were released from Ohio prisons, three times the number of inmates released two decades earlier.⁵

Since 2002, the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction (ODRC) has been working to develop a more holistic and systematic approach to prisoner reentry in which the concept of reentry underlies the assessments and programming that a prisoner receives while in prison as well as after release. While much of the postrelease reentry strategy is focused on "reentry intensive" inmates (those with the most serious criminal histories) who are released to supervision, the ODRC has launched a release preparation program for all inmates, regardless of their risk assessment level or whether they will exit to supervision. The Release Preparation Program, which starts six months prior to an inmate's release, includes employment readiness and other workshops, and seeks to provide transitional linkages so that the inmate will continue to receive needed services after release.

average age at the time of the prerelease interview was 36 years old. Almost two-thirds of the respondents (63 percent) had never been married, and 58 percent had minor children.

Criminal justice history and involvement

Most respondents reported having long histories of involvement with the criminal justice system, with 65 percent reporting that they had served more than one prison term and almost half (44 percent) reporting time served in a juvenile facility.⁶ Eight in ten respondents had been convicted more than once, and the average age at first arrest was approximately 17 years old. Of the respondents, a third were serving time for a property crime, roughly the same number (31 percent) for a violent offense, 14 percent for drug

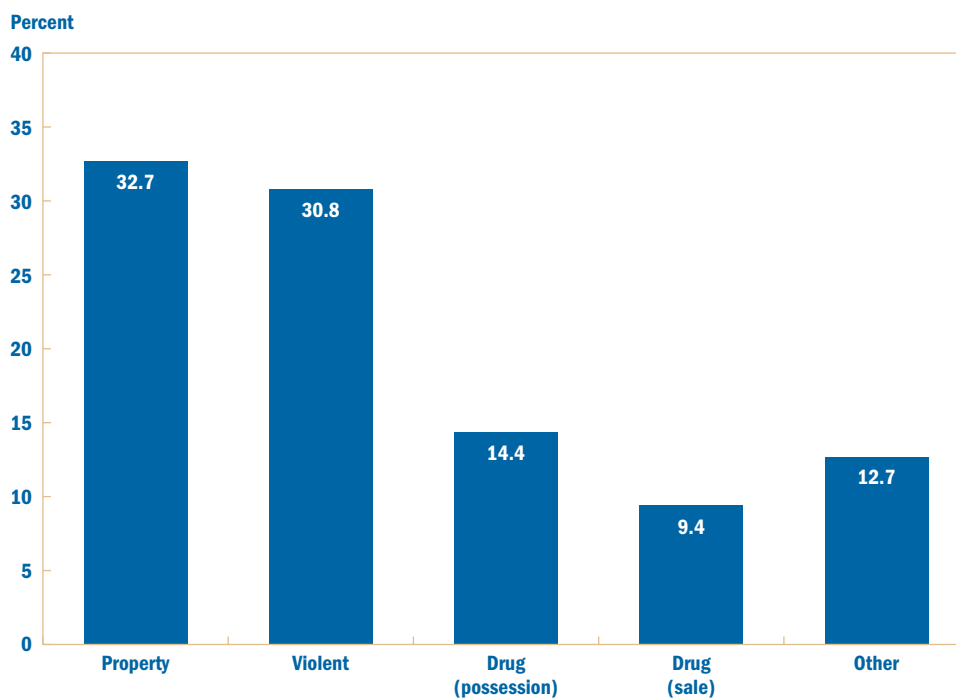
possession, 9 percent for drug dealing, and the remaining 13 percent for other offenses (figure 1).⁷

Thirty-nine percent of respondents had been serving time in prison because of a parole or probation violation; of those, 33 percent returned for technical violations and 67 percent returned for new crimes committed while on probation or parole. The average length of incarceration was about 24 months, with 45 percent of respondents serving two years or less. About 36 percent served three years or more.

Education

Many respondents entered prison with considerable educational, vocational, and employment needs. Upon entering prison, 45 percent did not possess a

FIGURE 1. Distribution of Study Sample by Conviction Offense



Note: Data are based on prisoners' self reports ($n = 416$).

high school degree or its equivalent. However, it is notable that 24 percent had at least some college education. One-third participated in classes or training while serving this prison term, spending an average of 11 hours per week in class. Moreover, one-fourth of the respondents improved their education level during their prison term, with 13 percent of all respondents earning a GED. Despite the fact that many respondents took advantage of in-prison educational opportunities, most respondents (81 percent) said that they wanted to take classes or training after release. Almost three-fourths of respondents (70 percent) reported they would need *some help* or *a lot of help* getting more education.

Employment

Prisoners in our sample also face significant employment barriers after their release. Although about two-thirds of respondents (68 percent) reported being legally employed in at least one job in the six months before their current prison term, 53 percent of the entire sample reported that at least some of their income came from illegal activity. Among the respondents reporting illegal income, 57 percent received at least half of their total income from illegal activity. During this term of incarceration, more than four out of five respondents (86 percent) held a prison job. Over two-thirds (68 percent) of those who worked while incarcerated reported holding a prison support job, such as working in the kitchen or performing sanitation or maintenance; 30 percent worked at a prison industry job, such as an auto mechanic or tractor driver.

When asked about life after prison, respondents overwhelmingly felt that employment was going to be important. Almost all respondents (90 percent) felt that having a job would be an important factor to staying out of prison. However, only one-fifth (22 percent) reported that they already had a job

lined up after release. Among respondents who had not yet secured postrelease employment, 89 percent anticipated that they would need *some help* or *a lot of help* finding a job. Most planned on talking to friends (66 percent), walking in and applying (61 percent), answering help wanted ads (61 percent), using a temporary agency (59 percent), and talking to relatives (58 percent) as a means of finding work after release. Nearly three-fourths of all respondents reported that they wanted *some help* or *a lot of help* obtaining job training after release.

Financial support

Respondents reported they would have few financial resources with which to support themselves after release. Aside from those with a job already lined up, respondents anticipated being dependent on family, friends, and public assistance until they fully transitioned back into their community. Not surprisingly, the most frequently reported sources of expected financial support after release were family (44 percent) and income from jobs (44 percent), with fewer respondents expecting public assistance (27 percent), financial support from friends (24 percent), or savings (17 percent). Eleven percent of respondents did not expect financial support from any source after their release from prison. Despite reporting barriers to financial security after release, respondents were generally optimistic about their expected financial situations. Almost two-thirds of respondents thought that it would be *pretty easy* or *very easy* to support themselves financially after release, and 81 percent reported that it would be *pretty easy* or *very easy* to provide themselves with food after release.

Substance Use

Alcohol and illegal drug use were very common among respondents in the six months prior to

prison, with 72 percent reporting use of at least one illicit drug and 60 percent reporting alcoholic intoxication. The most frequently used drugs were marijuana (56 percent), cocaine (38 percent), ecstasy (11 percent), and heroin (10 percent). A significant proportion of respondents were heavy drug users, reporting daily use of marijuana (27 percent) or cocaine (14 percent), for example. Moreover, many respondents indicated that their drug use negatively impacted their lives: almost one-third (32 percent) reported that they experienced problems in their

relationships due to drug use and over one-fourth of respondents (26 percent) had arguments at home due to drug use. Additionally, 41 percent reported spending a lot of time either using drugs or recovering from drug use in the six months prior to entering prison, and 37 percent said they wanted to stop using drugs or alcohol, but had been unable to do so.

The majority of respondents agreed that not using drugs (72 percent) and not drinking (61 percent)

RETURNING HOME STUDY DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The *Returning Home* study is being conducted in four states. 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 states in which the full research study would 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 is complete in Maryland and Illinois and is currently underway in Ohio and Texas.

In Ohio, the study design involves several data collection efforts with prisoners returning to the Cleveland area: (1) a self-administered survey given to groups of male prisoners about one month prior to their release, (2) a one-on-one interview with sample members one to three months after release, (3) a second one-on-one interview at four to six months after release, and (4) a third one-on-one interview at 12 to 16 months after release. Our goal is to portray each respondent's life circumstances immediately prior to and following their release from prison, as well as a year after their return to 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.

Participants were recruited over a 10-month period, from the end of May 2004 to March 2005, from 10 state pris-

ons. The facilities were selected from the institutions that released a substantial number of male prisoners to the Cleveland area to represent a variety of security levels. Generally, only individuals with prison sentences of at least one year were recruited for the study, in order to have a large number of respondents able to report on topics such as in-prison programming and employment.⁸ In each facility, we scheduled times to explain the study and distribute a self-administered survey to those willing to participate. Seventy-five percent of those who attended the study orientation agreed to participate in the study, yielding a sample of 424 men returning to the Cleveland area. To assess sample representativeness, we compared those in the pre-release sample who were released in 2004 with other adult males released to Cuyahoga County ($N = 4,872$). Only three differences emerged as statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) in a multivariate regression. Respondents in our sample were less likely to be incarcerated for a drug offense (22 versus 39 percent), more likely to be housed under medium security at release (48 versus 35 percent), and more likely to be released to supervision (75 versus 49 percent). Given that recruitment efforts were targeted at males serving at least a year in prison and returning to the Cleveland area, some of the report findings may not be representative of all male Ohio releases in 2004.

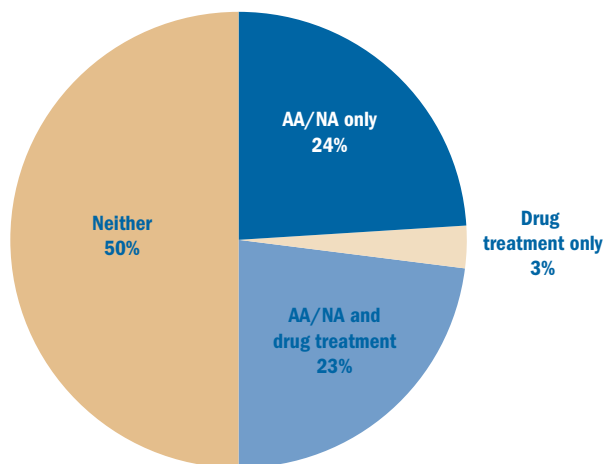
In addition to interviews with ex-prisoners, we are also holding focus groups with community residents in the Cleveland neighborhoods that receive the highest number of returning prisoners and conducting interviews with re-entry policymakers and practitioners in Cleveland.

would be important factors to helping them stay out of prison in the future. But despite these sentiments and expressed needs among some respondents, only 3 percent participated in drug treatment, 24 percent attended Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous (AA/NA), and 23 percent participated in both (figure 2).

Health

Most respondents (88 percent) expressed a positive view of their health, describing it as good or excellent. In spite of their positive outlook, many prisoners reported having been diagnosed with high blood pressure (18 percent), asthma (11 percent), arthritis (8 percent) or diabetes (4 percent). Infectious diseases were also mentioned by respondents, with small but significant numbers indicating they had been previously diagnosed with Hepatitis B/C (10 percent), tuberculosis (4 percent), HIV or AIDS (1 percent), or another sexually transmitted disease (4 percent). Moreover, 26 percent reported that they were currently on prescription medication for a health problem.

FIGURE 2. Drug or Alcohol Treatment Participation (n = 419)



While physical health problems are prevalent among this population, mental health problems present an equally daunting challenge for prisoners preparing to return to Cleveland. Roughly one in seven respondents (14 percent) reported having been diagnosed with depression and 8 percent reported having other mental health problems. Also of note is the intersection between substance use and health, with 9 percent reporting that they had experienced health problems due to their drinking and 13 percent reporting health problems due to drug use during the six months leading up to their current prison term.

Although many respondents reported at least one serious health condition, 89 percent anticipated that it would be *pretty easy* or *very easy* for them to stay in good health after their release. However, 86 percent reported that they would need help obtaining health care after their release.

WHAT WORRIES YOU THE MOST ABOUT YOUR LIFE AFTER PRISON?

- 31%—finding a job or not getting a job because of their criminal record
- 21%—“nothing” worried them about life after release
- 11%—obtaining money and being financially secure
- 10%—being accepted by society and readjusting to life outside prison
- 10%—staying out of trouble and avoiding old friends and hangouts
- 8%—staying away from drugs/alcohol and staying “clean”
- 6%—making the same mistakes and returning to prison

Responses from soon-to-be released prisoners (n = 405)

Family relationships and support

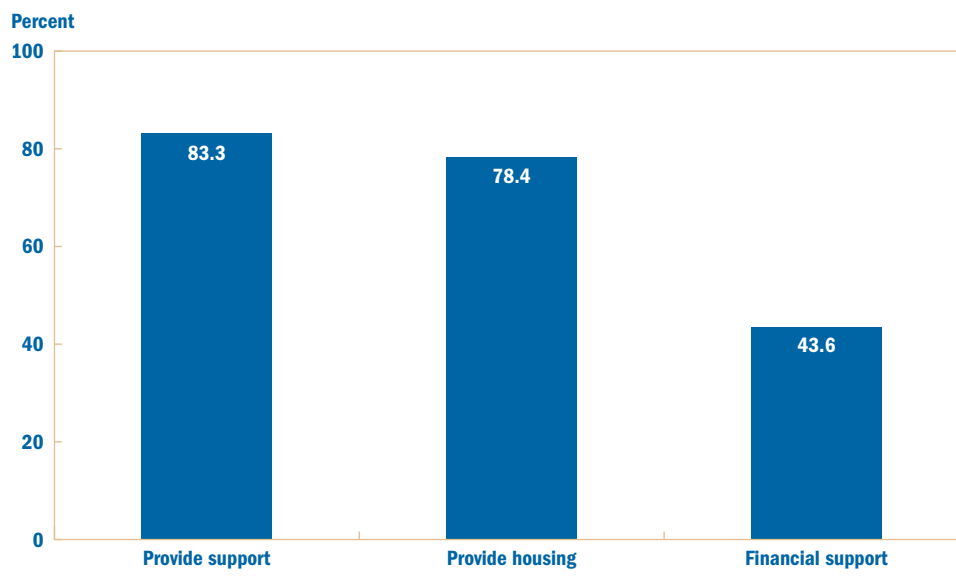
Before they began this prison term, almost two-thirds of the respondents (63 percent) had never been married, 8 percent reported being divorced or separated, and 23 percent were married or had been living with a partner as married prior to this prison term. Other respondents were widowed (4 percent) or reported some other type of relationship (3 percent). Many of these prisoners were also parents of minor children (58 percent), with 30 percent of respondents reporting that they had lived with at least some of their children prior to their current prison term. In addition, 89 percent of respondents with children reported providing financial support before they entered prison, with 43 percent of respondents with children providing daily financial support.

Family members were central to providing emotional support during the prison term.⁹ While incarcerated, most respondents (81 percent) said

their family was a source of support and almost all (92 percent) wanted their families to be involved in their lives. Furthermore, 81 percent reported that they felt close to their families during their prison stay. Respondents also felt they served as a source of support for their families, with only 28 percent reporting that they did not serve as a source of support.

Respondents had high expectations for family support after their release from prison. Eighty-three percent anticipated that their families would be supportive after their release, with most prisoners (70 percent) expecting to live with family after prison and almost half (44 percent) expecting that family would be a source of postprison financial support (figure 3). Few respondents were concerned about renewing their relationships with family. The vast majority (83 percent) felt that it would be easy. Among respondents who were parents, 80 percent thought that it would be easy to renew relationships with their children, and among those with minor

FIGURE 3. Expectations for Family Support (ns = 418, 379, and 416)



children, over half (58 percent) expected that at least some of their children would live with them after their release from prison.

Despite the high levels of family support reported by respondents, there were indications that many respondents had family members facing similar challenges—a history of substance abuse and involvement in the criminal justice system. Well over half of respondents (64 percent) had at least one family member who had been convicted of a crime and 30 percent had a family member currently serving time in prison. In addition, 57 percent reported that someone in their family had problems with drugs or alcohol.

Attitudes and beliefs

Most respondents were optimistic about their potential to successfully reenter society. Among the sample, most thought it would be *pretty easy* or *very easy* to find a place to live after release (66 percent of respondents who had not yet secured housing), financially support themselves (63 percent), and find a job (51 percent of respondents without a job lined up). Respondents also anticipated that it would be easy to stay out of prison after release (77 percent) and avoid a parole violation (77 percent of those who expected to be released on parole).

Though most respondents were hopeful about overcoming challenges they would face upon release, many also reported that they would need help confronting these challenges. Eighty-six percent of respondents reported that they would need help accessing health care, with significant proportions also indicating that they would need help accessing counseling (45 percent) or mental health treatment (28 percent). A majority of the prisoners indicated that upon release they would need help accessing job training services (74 percent) or obtaining more edu-

cation (70 percent) and over three-quarters wanted help obtaining financial assistance (76 percent) and transportation (76 percent).

Respondent optimism may have been influenced by high levels of reported spirituality, with two-thirds (63 percent) indicating high levels of faith and/or religious practices.¹⁰ Significant numbers reported praying or meditating daily (56 percent) or reading the Bible, Koran, or other religious literature every day (27 percent).

Housing and community

Given that the majority of respondents anticipated living with a family member after release, few expressed concern about securing postprison housing. At the time of the prerelease interview, 66 percent had housing lined up for after their release and an even greater proportion (70 percent) anticipated that they would live with a family member. Among the 28 percent who did not yet have a place to live,¹¹ the most common method for finding housing was to contact a family member (39 percent), followed by using a referral service or housing program (35 percent), asking their parole officer (30 percent), checking the newspaper (29 percent), accessing a government program (26 percent), asking a friend (24 percent), and contacting a shelter (24 percent). Among the prisoners who had not secured housing at the time of the interview, 66 percent thought that it would be *pretty easy* or *very easy* to find a place to live, though 80 percent anticipated that they would need help locating housing.

Most respondents who knew where they would live after release described their neighborhood as safe and said that it would not be difficult to stay out of trouble there (81 percent). More than half of respondents (53 percent) who had secured housing reported that they were looking forward to seeing

WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING FORWARD TO THE MOST ABOUT YOUR LIFE AFTER PRISON?

- 51%—renewing family relationships with children, parents, and significant others; rebuilding relationships; getting a “second chance”
- 19%—being employed in a good job; being financially successful
- 15%—“freedom,” “getting my life together,” “making decisions for myself”
- 3%—nothing to look forward to

Responses from soon-to-be released prisoners ($n = 410$).

certain people in their neighborhood; only one in nine respondents said they were nervous about seeing certain people in their neighborhood. Moreover, most respondents (84 percent) indicated that they would vote after release if they could.

Postrelease supervision

Seventy-five percent of the study sample reported that they would be subject to postrelease supervision.¹² Among those who knew they would be under parole supervision, a majority (83 percent) expected that their parole officer would be helpful during their transition back into the community. It is noteworthy that of the respondents who were going to be on parole, 77 percent thought that it would be *pretty easy* or *very easy* to avoid a parole violation.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Returning Home is a multistate, longitudinal study designed not only to contribute to the knowledge base about the pathways and implications of reentry,

but also to facilitate policy discussions at the local, state, and national levels. A statistical snapshot of male prisoners returning to Cleveland and Cuyahoga County, based on interviews conducted before release, indicates that these individuals are at high risk of various obstacles that may hinder their successful reintegration (table 1). Research findings from the Ohio Returning Home prerelease survey suggest several policy directions:

- Soon-to-be-released prisoners in our sample, who were men with an average age of 36 years, had long, serious histories of substance abuse and criminal justice involvement, including previous parole or probation violations. Over 70 percent reported illegal drug use or alcohol intoxication. About one-quarter had participated in a treatment program other than AA/NA 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 a third of respondents are leaving prison with less than a high school degree or equivalent and only 22 percent 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.
- Physical and mental health disorders affect a large group of returning prisoners, including 26 percent who are taking prescription medication. While 28 percent said that they would specifically need men-

tal health treatment, a surprising 45 percent reported that they would need help getting counseling. Providing information about access to health care after release should be an important component of reentry planning for soon-to-be-released inmates.

- About 6 in 10 prisoners have children under age 18. Because incarceration often separates parents from their children, prisons should prepare inmates for renewing their relationships with their

children, including guidance on how to provide emotional and financial support after release.

In addition to this research brief, we will be publishing topic-specific research summaries to inform policy and practice about prisoner reentry. We will also produce a full technical report, including analyses of all prerelease and postrelease data, postrelease criminal history data, and findings from interviews with community members and service providers. The final report, which will be published in 2007, will

Table 1. A Snapshot of Male Prisoners Returning to Cleveland (Ns range from 368 to 422)

Preprison attributes	Number of children when entered prison	1.8
	Respondent threatened, hurt, or harassed a family member before prison	14%
	Worked before prison	68%
Criminal justice history	Any illegal drug use before prison	72%
	Age at first arrest	18
	Served time in a juvenile correctional facility	44%
	Average number of prior incarcerations	2.6
	Currently serving time for a parole or probation violation	39%
In-prison attributes	Earned a GED while incarcerated	13%
	Participated in drug or alcohol treatment	26%
	Receiving treatment for depression	9%
	On medication for a health problem	26%
	Prayed or meditated daily	56%
	Read Bible or other religious literature daily	27%
Expectations and needs after release	Expected postprison earnings per hour (of those who planned to work)	\$13
	Expect to live with family after release	70%
	Need help finding a job	65%
	Need help getting more education	70%
	Need help getting job training	74%
	Need help getting child care	27%
	Need help getting counseling	45%
	Need help getting financial assistance	76%
	Need help getting mental health treatment	28%
Need help getting drug or alcohol treatment	26%	

present conclusions from the study and discuss them in the context of policy implications. The results of the Ohio study will also be a part of a larger cross-state analysis based on *Returning Home* research conducted in Illinois, Maryland, and Texas.

ENDNOTES

¹ Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction. "July 2005 Facts." Columbus, OH: Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction, 2005.

² This statistic is based on a Bureau of Justice Statistics estimate that 630,000 prisoners were released from federal and state prisoners in 2002. Paige M. Harrison and Jennifer C. Karberg. "Prison and Jail Prisoners at Midyear 2002." Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice, 2003.

³ Paige M. Harrison and Allen J. Beck. "Prison and Jail Inmates at Midyear 2004." Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice, 2005.

⁴ Nancy G. La Vigne and Gillian L. Thompson with Christy Visher, Vera Kachnowski, and Jeremy Travis. "A Portrait of Prisoner Reentry in Ohio." Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2003.

⁵ Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction, Bureau of Research.

⁶ The information in this section is based upon self-reported criminal behavior and may differ from the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction records on number of prior convictions, current conviction offense, etc.

⁷ In this report, property crimes include burglary, robbery, theft, car theft, and fraud or forgery; violent crimes include assault, homicide, sex offense, and multiple and sex offense; other includes weapons offense and other offense.

⁸ Individuals incarcerated for less than one year may not have the opportunity to participate in programs or employment opportunities before the conclusion of their sentence; thus, these individuals would not be able to respond to a significant number of the questions on the survey instrument.

⁹ The family support scale was comprised of the following items: felt close to your family, wanted your family to be

involved in your life, considered yourself a source of support for your family, and family was a source of support for you.

¹⁰ Items on the spirituality scale included frequency of prayer or meditation, frequency of reading the Bible, find strength in religion or spirituality, feels guided by God on a daily basis, spiritual/religious beliefs help define life goals, and faith helps understand right from wrong.

¹¹ Four percent of respondents did not answer this question.

¹² Three percent of respondents were not sure whether or not they would be supervised.

FOR FURTHER READING

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